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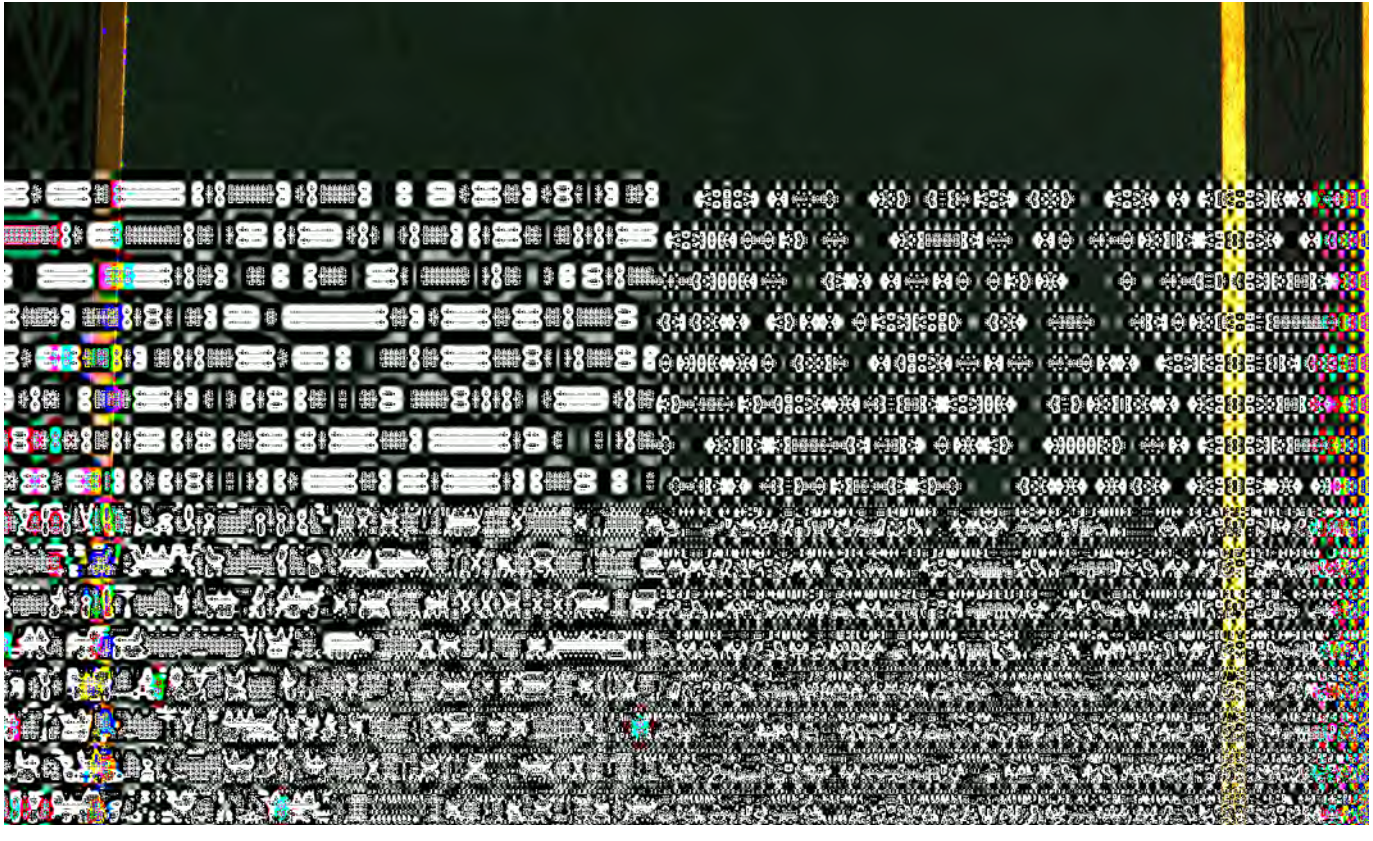

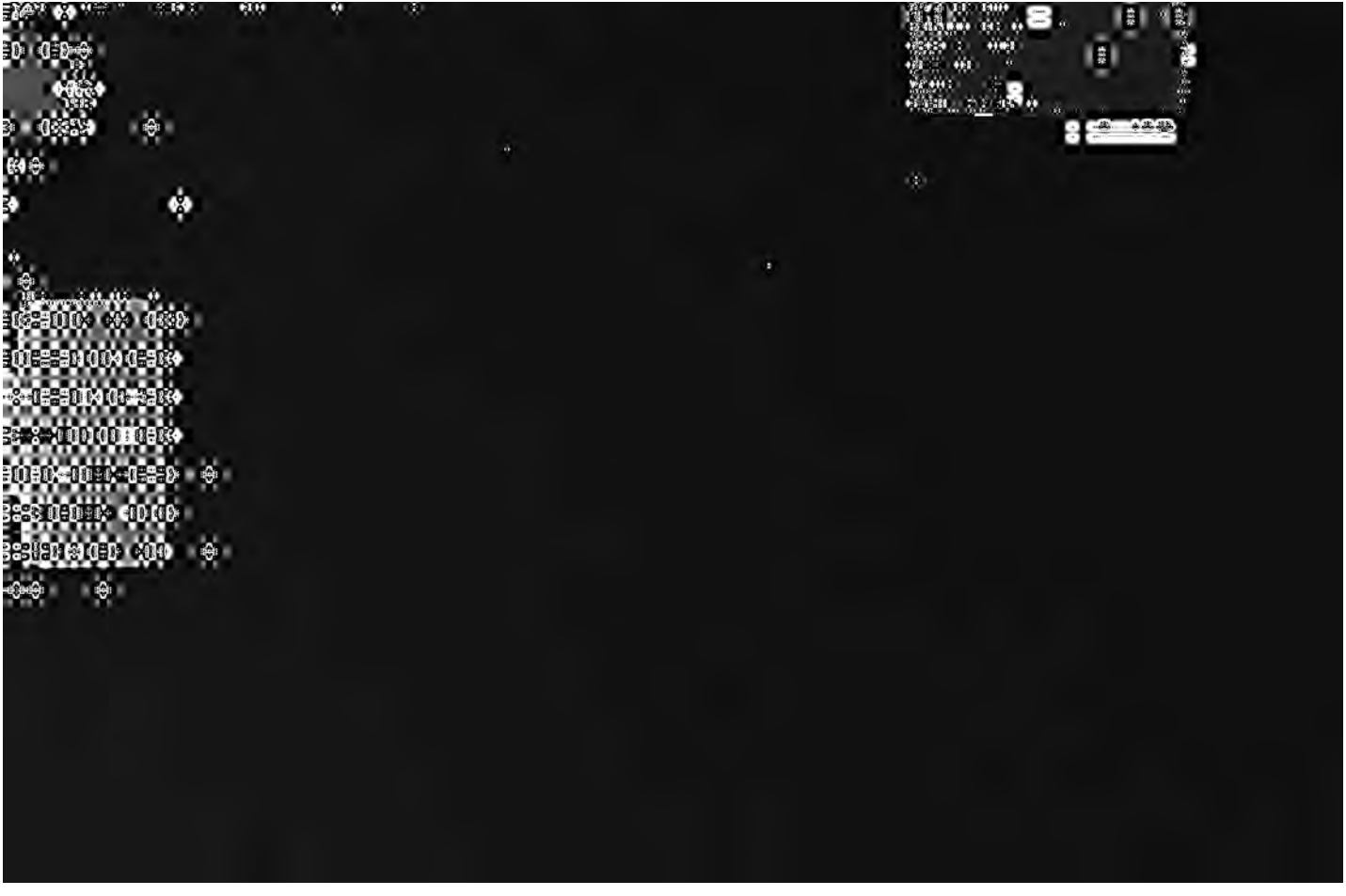

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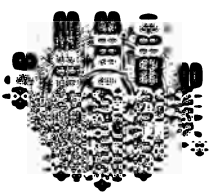

THE

TWO SIDES OF THE SHIELD

BY

CHARLOTTE M. YONGE

AUTHOR OF "THE HEIR OF REDCLYFFE," "UNKNOWN TO HISTORY," ETC.

IN TWO VOLUMES

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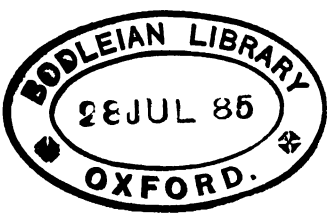

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THE TWO SIDES OF THE SHIELD.

CHAPTER I.

A HUNT.

Dolores was glad to recollect, when she awoke, that Uncle Reginald was in the house. It was as if she had a friend of her own there who might enter into all the ill-usage she suffered, and whom she could even consult about Uncle Alfred, so far as she could do so without disclosing all the underhand correspondence. She called doing so betraying Constance, but, in truth, she shrank more from shocking him with what he *might* think very wrong—since, after all, he belonged to that hard-hearted generation of grown-up people who had no feeling nor understanding of one's troubles.

As she went downstairs she was aware of an increasing hubbub, and frequently looking over the balusters, perceived the top of Primrose's wavy head above the close-cropped one of Uncle Regie, as, with

her mounted on his shoulder, he careered round the hall, with a pack of others vociferating behind him. There was a lull, for Lady Merrifield came out of her room just as Dolores had paused; Primrose was put down, the morning salutations took place, and Dolores had her full share of them. She was even allowed to sit next her uncle at breakfast; but her rasher of bacon had not been half eaten, before she had perceived that, as to possessing him as she used to do at home, he was just as much everybody else's Uncle Regie as hers, for during the time of their being stationed at Belfast, he had been so often with them, that he was quite established as the prince of playfellows.

"Uncle Regie, will you have a crack at the rabbits to-morrow? Brown said we might have a day, and we have been keeping it for you."

"Uncle Regie, the hounds meet at the Bugle this morning, won't you come and see them throw off?"

"Oh, let me come too!" "And me!" "And me!"

"My dear children," exclaimed their mother, "I can't have the whole tribe of little ones and girls going galloping after your uncle. You will only hinder him."

"No, no, Lily! the more Merrifields, the merrier the field. I'll drill them well. How far off is this Bugle?"

"Not two miles over Furzy Common."

"Oh! not so far, Hal!"

"That's nothing, Who is coming?"

A general outbreak of "Me's" ensued, but mamma laid an embargo on Primrose, who must stay at home and "help her," while Gillian looked wistful and doubtful, knowing that more efficient help than the little one's might be desirable.

"You had better go, my dear," said her mother, "if you are not tired. I don't like to send Mysie and Val without some one to turn back with them if your uncle and the boys want to go further."

But whereas it was not nearly time to start, Uncle Reginald was dragged down to inspect all the live stock in the stable-yard, at their feeding-time, and went off with Val and Primrose clinging to his hands, and the general rabble surrounding him.

Nothing could have been more alien to Dolores's taste than going out to a meet on foot through mud and mire—she who hated the being driven out to take a constitutional walk on the gravel road or the paved path! But she had some hope that while all the others ran off madly, as was their wont, she might secure a little rational conversation with Uncle Reginald. So she came down in hat and ulster, and was rewarded with "That's right, Doll; I'm glad to see they have taught you to take country walks."

"It is all compliment to you, Uncle Regie," said Gillian. "She hates them generally."

"Are we all ready? Where are Japs and Will?"

"Gone to shut up the dogs; and Hal is not coming."

"Beneath his dignity, eh?"

"I think he has some reading to do," said Gillian.

"Now mind, Reginald," said Aunt Lily, coming on the scene, "you are not to let those imps drag you farther than you like. It is a very different thing, remember, children, from going out with the hounds like a gentleman."

"Yes, mamma," returned Fergus. "If you would only let me have the pony!"

"And send home the girls as soon as you find them in the way," she added.

"All right," answered he, and off plunged the party; but Dolores soon found that she was not to be allowed much of Uncle Reginald's exclusive society. He did begin talking to her about her father's voyage, last letters, and intended departure from Auckland, but Valetta kept fast hold of his other hand, and the others were all round, every moment pointing out something—to them noticeable—and telling the story of some exploit, delighted when their uncle capped it with some boyish tales of Beechcroft, or with some droll, Irish story.

With such talk, the strong, healthy young folk little heeded the surface mud or the lanes. Even Dolores, when she heard her father's name in the reminiscences, was interested for a time, and was always hoping that the others would fly off and leave her to her uncle; but she was much less used to country mud and stout boots than the others, and she had been very much

tired by her expedition on the previous day, so that she had begun to find the way very long before they came out on an open green, with a few cottages standing a good way back in their gardens, and as their centre, one of the great old coaching inns of past days, now chiefly farmhouse, though a sign, bearing a golden bugle-horn upon a blue ground, stood aloft in front of it, over the heads of the speckled mass of tan, black, and white, pervaded with curved tails, over which the scarlet-coated whips kept guard, while shining horses, bearing red coats and black coats, boys, and a few ladies, were moving about, and carriages drew up from time to time.

There was a long standing about, and Colonel Mohun, being a stranger there himself, kept his flock on the outskirts, only Jasper plunging in, at sight of a mounted schoolfellow, while Gillian and Mysie told the names of the few they recognized. At last there was a move, and Jasper came back to point out the wood they were going to draw, close at hand. Should they not all go on and see it?

"Oh! let us! *do* come, Uncle Regie," cried Mysie and Val.

"Look here, Gill," said the uncle, "this child doesn't look fit to go any further."

"I'm very tired, and so cold," said Dolores.

"Yes," said Gillian, "we ought to go home now."

"Not me! not me;" cried the other two girls; "Uncle Regie will take care of us."

"I think you must come," said Gillian, "mamma said you had better come home when I do."

"Yes," said Wilfred, "we don't want a pack of girls to go and get tired."

"We shall go into all sorts of places not fit for you," said Jasper; "you wouldn't come back with a whole petticoat among you."

"And Val would be left stodged in a ditch for a month of Sundays," added Wilfred.

"I am afraid we had better part company, Gill," said the colonel. "I would take you on a little further, but this poor little Londoner won't have a leg to stand upon by the time she gets home."

"More shame for her to come out to spoil our fun," muttered Valetta, too low for her uncle to hear.

"Mamma will think we have gone quite far enough, thank you, uncle," said the sage Gillian, "and I think Fergus had better come too."

"*That* he had," said Jasper. "Fancy him over Peat Hill."

"He'll be left behind to be picked up as we come back," said Wilfred.

"No, no, no! I can keep up better than you can, Wil! Take me, Uncle Regie." The little boy was so near a howl that good-natured Colonel Mohun's heart was touched, and he consented to let him come on, though Jasper argued, "You'll have to carry him, uncle."

"No, I'll make you, master! Tell your mother not to wait luncheon for us, Gillian; we'll pick up something somewhere."

"Hurrah!" cried Wilfred and Fergus, to whom this was an immense additional pleasure.

The girls turned away into the lane, Valetta indulging in an outrageous grumble. "Why should Dolores have come out to spoil everything?"

Dolores did not speak.

"Just our one chance," sighed Mysie, "and perhaps we should have seen the fox."

"We may do that yet," said Gillian; "he may come this way."

"I don't care if he does," said Valetta. "I wanted to see them draw the copse. I believe Dolores did it on purpose to spoil our pleasure."

"Don't be so cross, Val," said Mysie. "She can't help being tired."

"Why did she come, then, when nobody wanted her?"

"For shame, Val," said Gillian, "you know mamma would be very angry to hear you say anything so unkind."

"It's quite true, though," muttered Valetta.

"Never mind, Dolly, dear," said Mysie, shocked. "Val doesn't really mean it, you know."

"Yes, she does," said Dolores, shaking her comforter off; "you all do! I wish I had never come here."

Mysie tried in her own persevering way to argue again that Val was only put out, and disappointed at having to turn back, to which Valetta, in spite of Gillian's endeavour to silence her, added, "So

stupid of her to come out! What did she do it for?"

Dolores, who hardly ever cried, was tired into crying now. "You grudge me everything; you wouldn't let me speak one single word to Uncle Regie, and kept bothering about! I'll never do anything with you again! I won't."

"Did you want to speak to Uncle Regie?" asked Mysie.

"To be sure I did! He is my uncle, that I knew ever so long before you did, and you never let him speak to me."

"Mrs. Halfpenny always put us on the high chair, with our faces to the wall when we were jealous," remarked Valetta.

"But did you want to say anything to him in particular?" said Mysie, revolving means of contriving a private interview.

"That's no business of yours! I wish you would let me alone!" broke out Dolores, in a fretful fright lest any one should guess that she had anything on her mind.

"To make up stories of us, of course," growled Valetta, but Gillian here interposed, declaring with authority that if she heard another word before they reached the paddock gate, she should certainly tell mother how disgracefully they had been behaving. When Gillian said such things she kept her word. Besides, by way of precaution, she marched down the muddy middle of the road, with Dolores limping

along the footpath on one side, and Val as far off as possible on the border of the ditch, on the other; the more inoffensive Mysie keeping by her side. They were all weary, and Dolores was very footsore also, by the time they reached home, at the very moment that the two Misses Hacket appeared coming up the drive. Lady Merrifield, having the day before invited the elder, as the purchases needed to be looked over, and preparations set in hand, and she did not then know that her brother was coming.

Dolores scarcely knew whether she was glad to see Constance. She had many doubts and qualms about that cheque. And if she had spent any quiet time alone with her uncle, she might have laid enough of her trouble before him to get some advice or help; but to ask for an interview, especially when "everybody" thought it was to make complaints, was too uncomfortable and alarming; and she was inclined to escape from thought of the whole subject altogether by taking action quickly.

Gillian gave her uncle's message about not waiting; the dirty boots were taken off in the hall, and Constance followed her friend up to her room to take off her things.

Dolores sat on the side of her bed, too much tired at first to be willing to move, Constance's pity elicited tears, and that they had all been so very unkind to her; they were angry at her getting tired, and they were jealous of her even speaking to Uncle Regie. Again this alarmed Constance, "You weren't going

to tell him about Mr. Flinders—you know you promised."

"He knows about him already, and he would tell me what to do."

"Oh! but that would never do, darling Dolly. You told me all the family were hard and unjust, and he would tell Lady Merrifield, and we should never be allowed to see each other again. And only think of my poor little secret! I didn't think you would have turned from your poor relation in misfortune for the sake of this grand Colonel."

The end of it was, that just as the gong was sounding, Dolores handed over to Constance an envelope directed to Mr. Flinders, and containing Mr. Maurice Mohun's cheque. It was off her mind now, she thought, as she shuffled down to dinner, looking so pale and uneasy that her aunt made her have a glass of wine and some gravy soup to begin with, and, when dinner was over, turned all the parcels off the schoolroom sofa, and made her lie upon it during the grand unpacking, which was almost as charming as the purchasing, perhaps more so, since there was no comparison with costlier articles.

There was not very much time. This was Friday, and Christmas Day was on Monday, so there were only two more clear week-days before the birthday, and Miss Hacket would be church-decorating on the morrow; but Lady Merrifield would not send her daughters to help, as there were plenty of hands without them, and they were too young to trust

in a mixed set, who were not always sure to be reverent.

Dinner had rested and refreshed them; they rejoiced in the absence of the man-kind, and Primrose was sent out for her walk while the numerous boxes and packages were opened, and displayed sconces and tapers, gilt balls and glass birds, oranges and bonbons, disguised in every imaginable fashion. There was a double set of the tapers, and two relays of devices in sweets, for the benefit of the party of the second night, a list of whom Miss Hacket had brought, that heads might be counted, and any deficiency supplied in time through Aunt Jane. For Lady Merrifield had commissioned Gillian to lay in—unknown to the good lady—a stock of such treasures as are valuable indeed to the little maid: shell pincushions, Cinderella slippers holding thimbles, cases of hair-pins, queer housewives, and the like things, wonderfully pretty for the price, and which filled the kind heart of Miss Hacket with rapture and gratitude at such brilliant additions to her own home-made contrivances in the way of cuffs, comforters, and illuminated workbags, all beautifully neat; though it was hard to persuade her of what Lady Merrifield averred, that such things ought to be far more precious than brilliant, shop-bought, ready-made ware, "with no love-seed in it."

"It is very hard," she said, "how fancy shops try to spoil all one used to be able to do for one's friends. The purses, and the penwipers, and the needle-cases

that were one's choicest presents in my youth, are all turned out now smart and tight and new-fashioned, but without a scrap of the honest old labour and love that went into them."

"But papa and mamma do care still," cried Gillian; "papa never will have any purse but the long ones mamma nets for him."

"And mamma always *will* have the old brown-and-blue carriage-bag that Aunt Phyllis worked," chimed in Mysie, "though Claude did say he would throw it into the sea when we crossed from Dublin, for it looked like an old housekeeper's."

"Claude was in a superfine condition then—in awe of an old Sandhurst comrade. He would be glad enough to see the old brown bag now, poor fellow," said Lady Merrifield, tenderly.

So it went on, with merry chat and a good deal of real preparation, till the early darkness came on, and a great noise in the hall announced the return of "the boys," among whom Lady Merrifield still classed her colonel brother. They were muddy up to the eyes, but they had seen a great deal more than was easy to understand in their incoherent accounts. Wilfred had rolled into a wet ditch, and been picked out by his uncle and hung up to dry at a little village inn, where—this seemed to have been the supreme glory—they had made a meal on pigs'-liver and bread-and-cheese before plodding home again—losing their way under Wilfred's confident pilotage—finding themselves five miles from home—getting a cast in a

cart for the two little boys just as Fergus was almost ready to cry—Colonel Mohun and Jasper walking alongside of the carter for two miles, and conversing in a friendly manner, though the man said he knew the soldier by his step, and thought it was a poor trade. Finally, he directed them by a short cut, which proved to be through a lane of clay and pools of such an adhesive nature that Fergus had to be pulled out step by step by main force by his uncle, who deposited him on some stones at the other end, and then came back to assist the struggles of Wilfred, who was slowly proceeding with Jasper's help.

"And that's the way we make you spend your Christmas holiday, Regie," said Lady Merrifield.

"Never mind, Lily; mud was a congenial element to us both in old times, you know, so no wonder your brood take to it like ducks or hippopotamuses. I say, we ought to have come in by the rear. Couldn't that imp of a buttons of yours come and scrape us before we go upstairs?"

"You are certainly grown older, Regie. You never would have thought of that once."

"No more would you, Lily—so do yourself justice."

However, when five o'clock tea was spread in the drawing-room, and the Hacket ladies came in, Constance beheld such a splendid vision of a fine, fair, though sunburnt face, long, light moustaches, and tall figure, that she instantly assumed her most affected graces, and did not wonder the less that the Mohuns were all so very high.

Dolores's strong desire for a private interview with her uncle died away when Constance carried off the cheque. She knew he would tell her she had no right to give it, and she did not want to be told so, nor to have any special inquiries made. She was not sorry that an invitation from a neighbour kept him and Hal out shooting all Saturday, and, on the other hand, she so far shrank from Constance's talk about Mr. Flinders as not to be vexed that it was too wet on Sunday afternoon for any going down to Casement Cottages.

It was on that wet afternoon, however, that Uncle Reginald, crossing the hall for once without his tail of followers, saw her slowly dragging downstairs with a book in her hand.

"Well, Miss Doll," he said; "you don't look very jolly! What's the matter?"

"Nothing, Uncle Regie."

"I don't believe in nothing. Here," sitting down on the stairs, with an arm round her, "tell me all about it, Dolly, we are old chums, you know. Have you got into a row?"

"Oh no!"

"Is there anything I can put straight?"

"No, thank you, Uncle Regie."

"There's something amiss!" said the good-natured, puzzled uncle. "What is it? I should have thought you would have got on with these young folks like—like a house on fire."

"That's all you know about it," thought Dolly. What she said was, "One never does."

"I don't understand that generalization," answered her uncle; then, as she did not answer, he added, "I am sure your Aunt Lily is very anxious to make you happy. Have you anything to complain of?"

"No," said Dolores, "I don't complain of anything."

She was thinking of Valetta's notion that she wanted to "make up stories of them," and therefore she said it in a manner which conveyed that she had a good deal to complain of, if she would, though really she would have been a good deal puzzled to produce a grievance that a man like Uncle Reginald would understand, though she had plenty for sympathy like Constance's.

However, it was not to be expected that a private conference should last long in that house, and Mysie appeared at that moment, looking for her cousin, to say that "Mamma was ready for her." Dolores went off with more alacrity than usual, and Uncle Reginald beckoned up his other niece, and observed: "I say, Mysie, what's the matter with Dolly?"

"She is always like that, uncle," answered Mysie.

"Don't you hit it off with her, then?"

"I can't, uncle," said Mysie, looking up, with a sudden wink now and then to stop her tears. "I thought we should have been such friends; but she won't let me. I didn't mean to be stupid and disagreeable, like the girls in 'Ashenden Schoolroom,' but she doesn't care for anybody but Miss Constance and Maude Sefton."

"I hope you are all very kind to her," said Uncle Reginald, rather wistfully.

"We try," said Mysie, who was not going to betray Wilfred and Valetta, and could honestly say so of herself and Gillian.

And there again came an interruption, in the shape of Gillian. "Mysie, mamma says we may finish up our *sacred* illuminated cards, for it will be Sunday work."

"Oh, jolly!" cried Mysie, jumping up. "And will you give me one rub of your real good carmine Gilly-flower, dear."

"And of my ultramarine, too," responded Gillian, wherewith the two sisters disappeared, radiant with goodwill and gratitude; while poor Uncle Reginald, who had intended to devote this wet Sunday afternoon to writing to his brother that Dolores was perfectly happy and thriving in Lily's care, and like a sister to his other favourite, Mysie, remained disappointed and perplexed, wondering whether the poor little maiden were homesick, or whether no children could be depended on for kindness when out of sight, and deciding that he should defer his letter till he had seen a little more, and talked to his sister Jane, who could see through a milestone any day.

It was understood that mamma preferred home-made cards to bought ones, so there was always a great manufacture of them in the weeks previous to Christmas, the comparative failures being exchanged among the younger members.

The presents were always reserved for Valetta's birthday and the tree, and this rendered the circulation of the cards doubly interesting. In the immediate family alone, there were thirteen times thirteen, besides those coming from, and going to outsiders, so that it was as well that a good many should be of domestic manufacture, either with pencil and brush, or of tiny leaves carefully dried and gummed. And mamma had kept an album, with names and dates, into which all these home efforts were inserted, and nothing else! This year's series began with a little chestnut curl of Primrose's hair, fastened down on a card by Gillian, and rose to a beautiful drawing of a blue Indian Lotus lily, with a gorgeous dragon-fly on it, sent by Alethea. The Indian party had sent a card for every one—the girls, beautiful drawings of birds, insects, and scenery; the brother, a bundle of rice-paper figured with costumes, and papa, some clever pen-and-ink outlines of odd figures, which his daughters beguiled from him in his leisure moments!

As to the home circle, it is enough to say that their performances were highly satisfactory to the makers, and were rewarded by mamma's kisses, and the text or verse she had secretly illuminated for each. She had no time to do more, and the series were infinitely prized and laid up as treasures. There were plenty of ornamental cards from without to be admired: the Brighton and Beechcroft aunts; the Stokesley cousins, and whole multitudes of friends pouring them in as

usual; so that the entire review seemed to occupy all those free moments of the Christmas Day, when the young folks were neither at church, nor at meals, nor singing carols themselves, nor hearing the choir sing in the hall, nor looking over photograph books and hearing old family stories. This last occupation was received in the family as the regular evening pleasure, ending in all singing, "When shepherds watch their flocks by night."

Dolores had a card from her aunt and each of her cousins, besides one of the parcel Uncle Reginald had brought. She did not think enough of the very bad drawing and smeared painting of the ambitious attempts she received, to feel at all disconcerted at having no reciprocity to offer. The only cards she had sent were to Constance Hacket, to Fräulein, and to Maude Sefton—the last with a sore sense of the long interval since she had heard.

However, there was a card from Maude, but it was a very poor one, looking very much like a last year's possession, and the letter was not much better, being chiefly an apology for having been too busy to write. Maude was going to lectures with Nona Styles—Nona was such a darling girl—and breaking off because she was wanted to rehearse Cinderella with this same darling Nona.

It made Dolores's heart go down farther, though there was a beautiful and unexpected card from Mrs. Sefton, one from her former servant, Caroline, also from Fräulein, and three or four from old friends of

her mother, who had remembered the solitary girl. In truth, she had more beautiful ones than anybody else, but she kept these in their envelopes, and showed herself so much averse to free fingering and admiration of them that Lady Merrifield had to call off Valetta, remind her that her cousin had a right to her own cards, and hear in return that Dolores was so cross.

"Dolly," said Uncle Reginald, in a low voice, since he was permitted to look over the cards with her, "I think I have found out part of your troubles."

She looked at him in alarm.

He put his finger on a card bearing the words, "Goodwill to men."

"Umph," said she. "I don't want everything of mine messed and spoilt."

And as his eye fell on Fergus's cards, he felt there was reason in what she said.

Aunt Lily had taken her for a quarter of an hour that morning, trying to infuse the real thought underlying the joy that makes it Christmas, not only yule-tide. But it all fell flat—it was all lessons to her—imposed on her on a day that she had not been used to see made what she called "goody." Last year her father had shut himself up after church, and she had spent the evening in noisy mirth with the Seftons.

CHAPTER II.

AN EGYPTIAN SPHYNX.

AUNT ADELINE was afraid of winter journeys as well as of the tumultuous festivities of Silverton; so at twelve o'clock, Colonel Mohun drove the pony-carriage to meet the little trim Brownie who stepped out of the station, the porter carrying behind her a huge thing, long, and swathed in brown paper. "It is quite light; it won't hurt," she said, "It must go with us. Put your legs across it, Regie. That's right."

"Then what becomes of yours?"

"Mine can go anywhere," said Miss Mohun, crumpling herself up in some mysterious manner under the fur rug, while they drove off, her luggage sticking far off on either side of the splashboard.

"What, in the name of wonder, are you smuggling in there?"

"If you must know, it is the body of a mummy over whose dissection you will have to assist."

"Ah! Rotherwood is coming."

"Rotherwood!"

"And his little girl. Just like him. Lily gets a

note this morning from London, telling her to telegraph if she can't have them by the 5.20 train. I've just been ordering a fly. It seems that Lady Rotherwood, going to meet Ivinghoe at the station, coming from school, found he had measles coming out! So they packed off his sister to Beechcroft without having seen him, and thence Rotherwood took her to London."

"And is having a fine frolic with her, no doubt; but he might as well have given Lily more notice, considering that a marquess or two makes more difference to her household than it does to his."

"Oh! she is glad enough, only in some trepidation as to how Mrs. Halfpenny may receive the unspecified maid that the child may bring."

"How jolly we shall be! I wish Ada had come."

"I tried to drag her out, but it gets harder and harder to shake her up. You must come back with me and see her."

"I say, Jane, have you seen Maurice's child lately?"

"Not very. She wouldn't come with the others last week."

"What do you think about her? I thought leaving her with Lily would have been the making of her. Indeed, I told Maurice there could not be a better brought up set anywhere than the Merrifields, and that Lily would mother her like one of her own; and now I find her moping about, looking regularly down in the mouth. I got hold of her one day and tried

to find out what was the matter, but she only said she would not complain. Can they bully her?"

"I'll tell you what, Maurice, Lily is a great deal too kind to her. She has a kind of temper that won't let them make friends with her."

"Come now! She was a nice jolly little girl at home. She and I have had no end of larks together, and it is hard to blame her for fretting after her home, poor child—Aye! I know you never liked her, or she might have done better with you and Ada than turned in among a lot of imps."

"I'm thankful it was otherwise!"

"Now do, Jane, set your mind to it. Don't be prejudiced, but make those sharp eyes of some use. I really feel bound to give Maurice an account of Dolly, and tell him what is best for her."

"I believe," said Jane, "that there is some counter-influence at work, and I am trying to find it out; but, after all, I believe patience is the only thing, and that Lily will conquer her if nobody meddles."

"'Tis not Lily I am afraid of, but her children."

"Nonsense, Regie; one would think you had never been turned loose into school to be licked into shape."

"She is a girl, not a cub like me."

"A worse cub, for she has not your temper, sir, and, moreover, you had had the wholesome discipline of a large family. Besides, nobody teases but Wilfred. Gillian and Mysie behave like angels to the tiresome puss."

"Well, I'm bound to believe you, Jenny, but I don't like the looks of it."

Aunt Jane's mysterious parcel was greeted rapturously, and conveyed into the dining-room, which had a semi-circular end, filled with glass, and capable of being shut off with heavy curtains when the season made snugness desirable. This bay had been set apart from the first for her operations, the tree, whose second season it was, having been taken up and already erected in the centre of the room, not much the worse for last year's excursion, for, if rather stunted, that was all the better. No one was excluded from the decoration thereof, since that was the best part of the sport to those too old for the mystery—and yet young enough to fasten sconces where their candles would infallibly set fire to the twigs above them. The only defaulters were Jasper, who had preferred going down to the meadows with his gun; and Dolores, who had retired to the drawing-room with a book, on having a paper star removed from immediate risk of conflagration. "They were determined not to let her help," she said.

So she only emerged when the workers halted for a merry, hurried meal in the schoolroom, where Jasper appeared, very late, very cross at having had to make himself fit to be seen, and, likewise, at having brought home no spoil, the snipes having been so malicious as to escape him. Having sallied forth before the post came in, it was only now that it broke on him that visitors were expected, and he did not like it at all.

"I thought we had got rid of all the enemy!" he growled, at his end of the table.

"That's what he calls Constance," thought Dolores.

"Polite," observed Gillian.

"This will be worse still, being lords and ladies," grumbled on Jasper, "I hate swells."

"Oh! but these aren't like horrid, common, fine lords and ladies," cried Mysie; "why, you know all mamma's old stories about the fun they had with cousin Rotherwood.

"What's the good of that! That's a hundred years ago. He'll just make mamma and Uncle Regie of no good at all! And then there's a girl too—" (in a tone of inconceivable disgust) "I don't want strange girls—an awful stuck-up swell of a Londoner, not able to do anything! I wish I had gone to spend Christmas with Bruce! I would if I had known it was to be like this."

The speech brought Mysie to the verge of tears. Aunt Jane's sharp ears heard it, and she looked at the head of the table, expecting to hear a rebuke; but Lady Merrifield turned a deaf ear on that side. Only after the meal, she called her son, "Jasper," she said, "I want to send a note to Redford, if you like to ride over with it. You need not come home till eight o'clock, if it is moonlight, if the boys are disengaged, and if you do really wish to keep out of the way."

Jasper's eyes fell under hers.

"Mamma, I don't want that."

"Only you said more than you meant, Japs. If it

relieves your mind, it hurts other people. But I do want the note taken, so go and come back in time for the sports; which I don't think you will find *much* damaged."

Meantime, Aunt Jane had ensconced herself behind the curtains; where she admitted no one but Miss Vincent and Uncle Reginald, and in process of time, mamma and Macrae. The others were still fully employed in garnishing the tree, though it was only to bear lights, ornaments and sweets. All solid articles had been for some time past committed to a huge box, or ottoman, the veteran companion of the family travels, which stood in the centre of the bay. Into its capacious interior everybody had been dropping parcels of various sizes and shapes, with addresses in all sorts of hands, which were to find their destination on this great evening. This was part of the mystery that kept Mysie and Valetta in one continual dance and caper. It was all they could do not to peep between the curtains when the privileged mortals went in and out, bearing all sorts of mysterious loads well covered up from all eyes. Wilfred *did* make one attempt, but something extraordinary snapped at his nose, with a sharp crack, and drove him back with a start.

A lamp had been taken thither, and there really was nothing more to do to the tree, the scraps of packing had been picked up, and the hands, tingling from fir-needle pricks, had been washed, though not without protest from Valetta that it wasn't worth

while, and from Wilfred that it was all along of these horrid swells—!

The sound of wheels summoned Lady Merrifield and her brother from the place of mystery, and they were in the hall when a fresh gust of keen air came in from the door, an ulstered figure hurried in, and something small and furred was put into the lady's embrace.

"Here's my Fly, Lily—! Look, Fly, here they all are—all the cousins. Off with the hat. Let us see your funny little face."

It was a funny little smiling face, set in short, light, wavy hair, not exactly pretty, but with a bright, quaint, confiding look, as if used to be shown off by her father, and ready to make friends on the spot. "And how is your boy?" as the round of greetings was completed, and the wraps thrown off.

"Going on capitally, better than he deserves, the young scamp, for suppressing all symptoms for fear he should be hindered from coming home. His mother was in a proper fright, she showed him to the doctor on the way, who told her to put him to bed at once, and send his sister out of the house. She never set eyes on him, or I would not have brought her here."

"I am exceedingly glad you have," said Lady Merrifield, bending for another kiss.

"And Lily, I've done another awful thing. Victoria kept old nurse to help with Ivinghoe, and we brought the Swiss *bonne*, Louise, away with us, but the poor thing found her sister very ill in London, and I

hadn't the heart to bring her away, so Phyllis said she would do for herself, if your maid, or some of them, would have an eye to her."

"There! I'm doubly glad, Rotherwood! If I had any fears it was not of you, or Phyllis; but that like Vich Ian Vhor, she should have her tail on. And, oh! Rotherwood, do you know what you are in for?"

"High jinks of some sort, I've no doubt. We picked up a couple of boxes at Gunter's and Miller's with a view thereto. Who is master of the revels?"

"Jane. She's too deep in preparations to come forth at present. Gillian, will you take Phyllis to the nursery, and take care of her. We are to have a very high tea at half-past six; but, Rotherwood, I promise that another day you shall have a respectable dinner in this house."

"Return to the prose of life, eh, Lily? Well, Fly, what do you think of it?"

"Oh, daddy, aren't you glad we came?" she cried, dancing off, in Gillian's wake, arm-in-arm with Mysie and Valetta, while he called after her, "Find the boxes, and make them over to the right quarter."

This was enough to make the whole bevy of children rush away, and only the three elders remained. Lord Rotherwood said, "This is short notice, Lily; but I did not know Reginald was here, and I thought you might want help. Don't be frightened, only a queer thing has happened. I went to W.'s bank yesterday. I thought they looked at me as if something was up,

and by-and-by one of the partners came and took me into his private room. There he showed me a cheque, and asked my opinion whether the writing was Maurice's. And I should say it decidedly was, but it was actually for seventy pounds, payable to order of Miss Dolores M. Mohun."

"Seventy!"

"Yes, and dated the 19th of August."

"Just before Maurice went."

There was a sudden silence, for the door opened; but it was to admit Miss Mohun, who began, "Oh! Rotherwood, you are too munificent. Why, what's the matter?" Lady Merrifield hastily explained, as far as she yet understood, what had brought him.

"How did they get the cheque?" she asked.

"Sent up from the country bank where it had been cashed—Darminster."

"Ah!" came from both the aunts.

Lord Rotherwood went on. "They asked me who Miss Dolores Mohun was, and I could do no otherwise than tell them, and likewise where to find her, but I explained that she is a mere child; and I told them I would come down here, so I hope you will have as little annoyance as possible."

"It is very good of you, Rotherwood, but I can't understand it at all. Was her name on the back?"

"Certainly; I told them I thought the whole thing must be a well got up forgery, and a confidential clerk was to go down to-day to Darminster to try to find out who gave it in there."

"Darminster! Flinders!" ejaculated Miss Mohun.

"Regie," exclaimed Lady Merrifield; "what did you say about having seen some one like Dolores at Darminster station?"

"I was nearly jumping out after her. I should have said it was herself, if it had not been impossible. Why she was with you at Rockstone, and it was a pouring, dripping day," said the colonel.

"No, she was not. She begged to spend the day with Constance Hacket, and we picked her up as we came home. Poor child, what has she been doing? I have not looked after her properly."

"But need she have had anything to do with it?" said Colonel Mohun. "How should a cheque of Maurice's come into her possession?"

"She did tell me," said Lady Merrifield," that her father had left one with her to pay for some German scientific book that might be sent for him."

"I see, then!" cried Miss Mohun. "That wretch Flinders must have got into communication with her, and induced her to fill up her father's cheque for him."

"But why should it be Flinders?" said Lord Rotherwood.

"Jane found out that he is living at Darminster, and has been trying to put me on my guard," returned Lady Merrifield.

"It is all that fellow Flinders, depend upon it," said Colonel Mohun. "He is quite capable of it, and you'll find poor Dolly has nothing to do with it. Quite

preposterous. And look here, Lily, let the poor child alone to enjoy herself to-night. Most likely Rotherwood's clerk, or detective, or whatever he may be, will have ferreted out the rights of the matter at Darminster. I sincerely hope he will, and have Flinders in custody, and then you would have upset her and accused her all for nothing."

"I am glad you think so, Regie," said Lady Merrifield. "I am thankful enough to wait, and hope it will be explained without spoiling the children's evening."

"All right," said the visitor; "I only hope I have not spoilt yours."

"Oh! one learns to throw things off. I shall believe it is all Flinders, and none of it the child's," said Lady Merrifield, carefully avoiding a glance that could show her any gesture of dissent on the part of her sister, and only looking up for her brother's nod of approval. "Besides, how foolish it would be to worry myself when I have two such protectors! It was very good in you, Rotherwood, I only hope we shall take good care of your Fly, and that her mother will be satisfied about her."

"She knew the little woman and I should have a lark together," said he. "The governess was safe out of reach, holiday-making, so I could have her all to myself. Victoria suggested her brother's, and we must go there before we have done, but business and the pantomime by good luck took us to London first. So when I wrote to you from the bank, I also let her

know that I was obliged to take the little woman down here first. I *couldn't* take her to High Court till Louise is available again."

"So much the better, I'm sure."

"And what I was going to say is, that Rotherwood has been startlingly munificent and splendid," said Aunt Jane. "We shall have a set of new surprises."

"I don't in the least know what I brought. I only told each of them to put up such a box as they sent out for Christmas concerns. Do precisely what you please with them."

"Come and see, Lily, for I think there will be enough to reserve a fresh lot of things for Miss Hacket's affair. By-the-by, Regie, did you say it rained at Darminster?"

"Poured all the way down."

"Well, we had it quite fine."

"Was it fine here?"

"Yes, certainly," said Lady Merrifield, "or Primrose would not have gone out. Take care of Rotherwood, Regie. You know his room."

And the two sisters crossed the hall, where the "very high tea" was being laid; hearing from the regions above sounds of exquisite glee and merriment, as perfect and almost as inexpressive of anything else as the singing of birds, so that they themselves could not help answering with a laugh, before they vanished into the chamber of mystery.

Indeed, Phyllis's conversation was like a fairy tale. Her brother's illness, which was not enough to damp

any one's spirits, had prevented or hindered a grand children's party as the Butterfly's Ball, where she was to have been the Butterfly, and Lord Ivinghoe the Grasshopper, and all the children were to appear as one of the characters in Roscoe's pretty poem. Never was anything more delightful to the imagination of the little cousins, and they could not marvel enough at her seeming so little uneasy about anything so charming, and quite ready and eager to throw herself headlong into all their present enjoyments, making wonderful surmises as to the mystery in preparation.

Dolores heard the laughing, and it did not suit with her vaguely uneasy and injured frame of mind; feeling dreadfully lonely too, as she came downstairs, dressed for the evening, but not knowing where to go, for the dining-room was engrossed, the schoolroom was dark, and the fire out, the drawing-room occupied by the two gentlemen. She crouched down in one of the big arm-chairs on either side of the hearth in the hall, and began to read by the firelight. Presently Jasper came in from his ride, and began taking off his greatcoat, leggings, and boots, whistling as he did so, then, perceiving the tempting object of a black leg sticking out of the chair, he stole up across the soft carpet, and caught hold of the ankle. He received a vigorous kick in return (which perhaps he expected) but what he did not expect was the black figure that rose up in outraged dignity and indignation. "For shame! I won't be insulted!"

"Whew! I thought 'twas Val! I beg your pardon."

"I shall ask my aunt if I am to be insulted."

"Well, if you choose to take it in that way—A man can't do more than beg pardon! I'm sure I would never have presumed to touch you if I had known it was your Dolorousness."

And he turned to walk away, just as the babbling ripple of laughter began to flow downstairs, and a whole mass of little girls intertwined together was descending. "I always hop," said a voice new to him, "except on the great staircase, and mother doesn't like it there. But this is such a jolly stair. Can't you hop?"

Hopping in a threefold embrace on a slippery stair was hardly a safe pastime, and before Jasper had time to utter more than "Holloa there! take care!" there descended suddenly on him an avalanche of little girls, knocking him off his feet, so that all promiscuously rolled down two or three steps together. Fergus and Primrose, who had somehow been holding on behind, remained upright, but nevertheless screaming. The shrieks of the fallen were, however, laughter. There was a soft rug below, and by the time the gentlemen had rushed out of the dining-room, and the ladies from the curtained recess, giggling below and legs above were chiefly apparent.

"Any one hurt?" was of course Lady Merrifield's cry.

"Oh no, mamma. Only we are so mixed up we can't get up," called out Mysie.

"Is this arm you or me?" exclaimed Phyllis, following up the joke.

"Come, sort yourselves, ladies and gentlemen," said Lord Rotherwood. "What's this, a Fly's wing?"

"No, it's mine," cried Val, as his hand pulled her out, and the others extricated themselves, still laughing, so that they could hardly stand, and Fly declaring, "Oh, daddy, daddy, it is such fun! I am so glad we came," and taking a gratuitous leap into the air.

"Every one to her taste," said Lady Merrifield, "I congratulate those to whom a compound tumble-down-stairs is felicity."

"She has found her congenial element, you see," said her father, as the elders proceeded upstairs to their toilette. "'Tis laughing-gas with her to be with other children, and the *most laughingest* of all are naturally yours, old Lily."

Meanwhile Jasper, risen on his stocking soles, looked all over at the little figure, dressed old picture fashion, in the simplest white frock with blue sash, and short-cut hair tied back with blue. "Well, you *are* a jolly little girl," he said, "and a cool customer, too! What do you mean by knocking a fellow over the first time you see him?"

"And what do you mean by coming like a great—huge—big elephant in our way to stop up the stairs?" demanded Fly, in return.

"Do you mean to *insinivate* that 'twas I that made you fall?" said Jasper—"I, that was quietly walking up the stairs, when down there came on me a shower—not cats and dogs, but worserer, far worserer! Why, I'm kilt! my nose is flat as a pancake, I shan't recover

my beauty all the evening for the great swells that are coming."

"Jasper, Japs," called his mother's warning voice, "you *must* come up and dress, for tea is going in."

He obeyed, rushing two steps at a time; but meeting, at the bottom of the attic flight, his sister Gillian, he demanded, "Gill, what awfully jolly little girl have they got down there?"

"Why, Fly, of course, Lady Phyllis Devereux—"

"No, no, nothing swell, a comical little soul, with no nonsense about her, in a white thing."

"Well, that's Phyllis. There's no one else there."

"I say, Gill, 'tis like sunshine and clouds. She and the other, I mean. Why, I gave a little pull to a foot I saw in the armchair, thinking it belonged to Val, and out breaks my Lady of the Rueful Countenance, vowing she'll complain that I've insulted her; and as to the other, the whole lot of them tumbled over me together on the stairs, and she did nothing but laugh and chaff."

"I hope she is not a romp," said the staid Gillian, sagely, as she went downstairs.

But on that score she was soon satisfied. Phyllis Devereux was a thorough little lady, wild and merry as she was, and enchanted to be in the rare fairyland of child companionship. And that indeed she had, Mysie and Valetta, between whose ages she stood, hung to her inseparably, and Jasper was quite transformed from his grim superciliousness into her

devoted knight. At tea-time there was a competition for the seats next to her, determined by Valetta's taking one side, in right of the birthday, and Jasper the other, because he secured it, and Mysie gave way to him because he was Japs, and she always did. While Dolores laid up a store of moralizings on the adulation paid to the little lady of title, and at the same time speculated what concatenation of circumstances could ever make her Lady Dolores Mohun. On the whole, it would be more likely that her father should gain a peerage by putting down a Fijian rebellion than that it should be discovered that his mother, Lady Emily, had been the true heiress of the marquessate, and even so, an uncomfortable number of people must be disposed of before it could come to him. She had one consolation, however, for Uncle Reginald, always kind to her, was particularly affectionate this evening, as if he would not have that little foolish Fly set up before her.

The tea and the tree both went off joyously. There is no need to describe the spectacle to folks who can count their Christmas-trees by the years of their life, and the memorable part of this one was that much of the fruit that had been left hanging on it was now metamorphosed into something much more gorgeous —oranges had become eggs full of sugar-plums, gutta-percha monkeys grinned on the branches, golden flowers had sprung to life on the ends of the twigs, a lovely jewel-like lantern crowned the whole, and as to sweets, everybody—servants and all—had some

delightful devices containing them, whether drum, bird, or bird's nest.

Before the distribution was over, it was observed that Aunt Jane and Uncle Reginald, also Harry, had vanished from the scene. There was a pause, during which such tapers as began to burn perilously low, were extinguished, an operation as delightful apparently as the fixing them. Presently a horn was heard, and a start or shudder of mysterious ecstacy pervaded the audience, as a tall figure came through the curtains, and announced:

"Ladies and gentlemen, I have the honour to inform you that a fresh discovery has been made in the secret chambers of the Pyramid of Chops, otherwise known as Te-Gun-Ter-ra. A mummy has been disinterred, which is about to be opened by the celebrated Egyptologist, Herr Professor Freudigfeldius, who has likewise discovered the means of making such a conjuration of the Sphynx that she will not only summon each of the present company by name, but will require of each of them to reply to a question. The penalty of a refusal is well known!"

Therewith the curtains were drawn back, and a scene was presented which made some of the spectators start. Behind was the semblance of a wall marked with the joints of large stones, and lighted (apparently) with two brass lamps. On the floor lay extended an enormous mummy, with the regulation canvas case, and huge flaps of ears, between which appeared a small, painted face, and below lay a long,

gaily coloured scroll in hieroglyphics. Exalted stiffly in a seat placed on a seeming block of stone, was a figure, with elbows, as it were glued to its sides, and hands crossed, altogether stone-coloured and monumental, and with the true Sphynx head, surrounded with beetles, lizards, and other mystic creatures (very chocolate-coloured). And beside her stood the Herr Professor, in a red fez, long dark gown, and spectacles, a flowing beard concealing the rest of his face. How delightful to see such an Egyptologist! Even though one perfectly knew the family beard and fez; also that the gown was papa's old dressing-gown, captured for the theatrical wardrobe. And how grand to hear him speak, even though his broken English continually became more vernacular.

"Liebes Herrschaft," he began, "I vould, nobles, gentry, and ladies say. You here see the embalmed rests of the celebrated monarch Nic-nac-ci-no. Lately up have I them graben, and likewise his tutelar Sphynx have found, and have even to give signs of animation compelled."

Touching the effigy with his wand, she emitted certain growls and hisses, which made Primrose hide her face in alarm at anything so uncanny, and Lord Rotherwood observe—

"Nearly related to the cat-goddess Pasht; I thought so."

"There was something of the lion or cat in the Sphynx," said Gillian, gravely, while the three little girls clasped each other's hands with delightful thrills of awe and expectation.

"Observe," continued the Professor, "the outer case with the features of the deceased is painted. I should conclude that King Nic-nac, etcetera, had been of a peculiarly jolly—I mean frölich—nature, judging by the grin on his face. We proceed——"

As he laid his hand on the wrapper, the Sphynx gave utterance to sounds so like the bad language of a cat that some looked round for one. The Professor waved at her, and she subsided. He turned back the covering, and demanded, "Will the amiable Fräulein there, Mademoiselle Valetta, come and see what treasures she can discover in the secrets of the tomb?"

Val, who in right of her birthday, had expected the first call, jumped up, but the Sphynx made awful noises as she advanced, and the Professor explained that she would have to answer the Sphynx's question first.

"But I don't know Egyptian," she observed.

"Never mind, it will sound like English."

It did so, for it was, "How many months old art thou, maiden?"

Val's arithmetic was slightly scared. She clasped her hand nervously, and was indebted to the Professor for the *sotto voce* hint, "twelve nines," before she uttered "a hundred and eight."

The Sphynx relapsed into stoniness, and the Herr Professor guided the hands, which trembled a little, to the interior of the mummy, whence they drew out a basket, labelled (wonderful to relate) "Val," and

containing—oh! such treasures, a blue egg full of needlework implements, a new book, an Indian ivory case, a skipping-rope, a shuttlecock, and other delights past description. The exhibition of them was only beginning when the Professor called for Primrose, who was too much frightened to come alone, and therefore was permitted to be brought by Mrs. Halfpenny. The Sphynx was particularly amiable on this occasion, and only asked "When Primroses came?" and as the little one, in her shy fright did not reply, nurse did so, with, "Come, missie, can't you find a word to tell that mamma's Primrose came in spring." This was allowed to pass, and Mrs. Halfpenny bore off her child, clutching a doll's cradle, stuffed with pretty things, and for herself a bundle wrapped up in a shawl from Sir Jasper himself.

After Primrose was gone to bed, the Sphynx became much more ill-tempered and demonstrative, snarling considerably at the approach of some of the party, some of whom replied with convulsive laughter, some, such as Jasper, with demonstrations of "poking up the Sphynx." She had a question for everybody —Fly was asked, "Which was best, a tree or a Butterfly's ball?" and answered, with truthful politeness, that where Mysie and Val were was best of all. She carried off a collection that had hastily been made of Indian curiosities, photographs of her two friends, and a book; and her father, after being asked, "What was the best of insects?" and replying,

"On the whole, I think it is my house-fly, even when she isn't a butterfly," received a letter-weight of brass, fashioned like an enormous fly, which Lady Merrifield had snatched up from the table for the purpose. The maids giggled at the well-known conundrums proposed to them, and Dolores had a very easy question — "What was the weather this day week?"

"A horrid wet day," she promptly answered, and found herself endowed with a parcel containing some of the best presents of all, bangles from the Indian box, a beautiful pair of stork-like scissors, a writing-case, etc.

"The Sphynx's invention is running low," observed Jasper to Gillian, when the creature put the same question about last week's weather to Herbert, the page-boy, as a prelude to his discovering the treasures of the mummy, as a knife and an umbrella. His view of the weather was that it was "A fine day ma'am! yes, a fine day."

Macrae came last, and the Sphynx asked him which of the two contrary views was right.

"It was fine, ma'am, that I know. For I walked down with nurse, and little Miss Primrose into Silverton, to help to carry her in case she was tired, and we never had occasion to put up an umbrella."

Wherewith Macrae received his combination of gifts and retired; the mummy being completely rifled, and the construction of the body, a frame of light, open wicker-work, revealed. Aunt Jane had had it

made at the basketmaker's, while as to the head and covering, her own ingenious fingers had painted and fashioned them. Everybody had to look at everybody's presents, a lengthened operation, and then there was a splendid game at blindman's-buff in the hall, in which all the elders joined, except mamma, who had to go and sit in the nursery with the restless and excited Primrose while Mrs. Halfpenny and Lois went down to the servants' festivity.

When she came down again, it was to quiet the tempest of merriment, and send off the younger folks in succession to bed, till only the four elders and Hal remained on the scene, waiting till there was reason to think the household would be ready for prayers.

"It was Dolores that you saw at Darminster, Reginald," said Miss Mohun, quietly.

"You Sphynx woman, how do you know?"

"You said it was raining at Darminster."

"Yes, that it was, everywhere beyond the tunnel through the Darfield hills."

"Exactly, I know they make a line in the rainfall. Well, here it was dry, but Dolores called it a wet day."

"Now I call that too bad, Jane, to lay a trap for the poor child in the game," cried Colonel Mohun, just as if they had still been boy and girl together.

"It was to satisfy my own mind," she said, colouring a little. "I didn't want any one to act on it. Indeed, I think there will be no occasion."

"Besides," he added, "it is nothing to go upon! No doubt, if it wasn't raining, it was the next thing to it here, and how was she to recollect at this distance of time? I won't have her caught out in that way!"

"I am glad she has a champion, Regie," said Lady Merrifield. "Here come the servants."

CHAPTER III.

A CYPHER AND A TY.

DOLORES was coming down to breakfast the next morning when Colonel Mohun's door opened. He exclaimed, "My little Dolly, good morning!" stooped down and kissed her.

Then, standing still a moment, and holding her hand, he said—

"Dolly, it was not you I saw at Darminster station?"

It was a terrible shock! Some one, no doubt, was trying to set him against her. And should she betray Constance and her uncle? At any rate, almost before she knew what she was saying, "No, Uncle Regie," was out of her mouth, and her conscience was being answered with "How do I know it was me that he saw? these fur capes are very common."

"I thought not," he answered, kindly. "Look here, Dolly, I want one word with you. Did your father ever leave anything in charge with you for Mr. Flinders? Did he ever speak to you about him?"

"Never," Dolores truly answered.

"Because, my dear, though it's a hard thing to say, and your poor mother felt bound to him, he is a slippery fellow—a scamp, in fact, and if ever he writes to you here, you had better send the letter straight off to me, and I'll see what's to be done. He never has, I suppose?"

"No," said Dolores, answering the word *here*, and foolishly feeling the involvement too great, and Constance too much concerned in it for her to confess to her uncle what had really happened. Indeed, the first falsehood held her to the second; and there was no more time, for Lord Rotherwood was coming out of his room further down the passage. And after the greetings, as she went downstairs before the two gentlemen, she was sure she heard Uncle Regie say, "She's all right." What could it mean? Was a storm averted? or was it brewing? Could that spiteful Aunt Jane and her questions about the weather be at the bottom of it?

The fun that was going on at breakfast seemed a mere roar of folly to her, and she had an instinct of nothing but getting away to Constance. She soon found that there would be opportunity enough, for the tree was to be taken down in a barrow, and all the youthful world was to carry down the decorations in baskets, and help to put them on. She dashed off among the first to put on her things, and then was disappointed to find that first all the pets were to be fed and shown off to Fly, who appreciated them

far more than she had done—knew how to lay hold of a rabbit, nursed the guinea-pigs and puppies in turn, and was rapturous in her acceptance of two young guinea-pigs and one puppy.

"I can keep them up in daddy's dressing-room while we are at High Court, and it will be such fun," she said.

"Will he let you?" asked Gillian, in some doubt.

"Oh! daddy will always let me, and so will Griffin —his man, you know, only we left him in London because daddy said he would be in your butler's way, but I can't think why. Griffin would have helped about the tree and learnt to make a mummy when we have our party. Louise would not let me have them in the nursery, I know, but daddy and Griffin would, and I could go and feed them in the morning before breakfast. Griffin would get me bran! That is, if we do go to High Court; I wish we were to stay on here. There's nobody to play with at High Court, and grandpapa always keeps daddy talking politics, so that I can hardly ever get him! Mysie, whatever do you do with your father away in India?"

"Yes, it is horrid. But then, there's mamma," said Mysie, whispering, however, as she saw Dolores near, and feared to hurt her feelings.

"Ah!" said Fly, with a tender little shake of her head; "'tis worse for her to have no mother at all! Is that why she looks so sad?"

"'Cross' is the word," said Wilfred. "I can't think what she is come bothering down here for!"

"Oh! for shame, Wilfred!" said Fly. "You should be sorry for her."

And she went up to Dolores, and by way of doing the kindest thing in the world, said—

"Here's my new puppy. Is not he a dear? I'll let you hold him," and she attempted to deposit the fat, curly, satiny creature in Dolores's arms, which instantly hung down stiff, as she answered, half in fright, "I hate dogs!" The puppy fell down with a flop, and began to squeak, while the girls, crying, "Oh! Dolly, how could you!" and "Poor little pup!" all crowded round in pity and indignation, and Wilfred observed, "I told you so!"

"You'll get no change but that out of the Lady of the Rueful Countenance," said Jasper.

Mysie had for once nothing to say in Dolores's defence, being equally hurt for Fly's sake and the puppy's. Dolores found herself virtually sent to Coventry, as she accompanied the party across the paddock, only just near enough to benefit by their protection from the herd of half-grown calves which were there disporting themselves; and, as if to make the contrast still more provoking, Fly, who had a natural affinity for all animals, insisted on trying to attract them, calling, "Sukkey! sukkey!" and hold out bunches of grass, in vain, for they only galloped away, and she could only explain how tame those at home were, and how she went out farming

with daddy whenever he had time, and mother and Fräulein would let her out.

The tree meantime came trundling down, a wonderful spectacle, with all its gilt balls and fir-cones nodding and dangling wildly, and its other embellishments turning upside down. There were greetings of delight at Casement Cottage, and Miss Hacket had kissed everybody all round before Gillian had time to present the new-comer, and then the good lady was shocked at her own presumption, and exclaimed—

"I beg your ladyship's pardon! Dear me! I had no notion who it was!"

"Then please kiss me again now you do know!" said Fly, holding up her funny little face to that very lovable kind one, and they were all soon absorbed in the difficulty of getting the tree in at the front door, and setting it up in the room that had been prepared for it.

Dolores had hoped to confide her alarms to Constance's sympathetic ear, but her friend, who had written and dreamt of many a magnificently titled scion of the peerage, but had never before seen one in her own house, had not a minute to spare for her, being far too much engrossed in observing the habits of the animal. These certainly were peculiar, since she insisted on a waltz round the room with the tabby cat, and ascended a step-ladder, merrily spurning Jasper's protection, to insert the circle of tapers on the crowning chandelier. There was nothing left

for Dolores to do but to sit by in the window-seat, philosophizing on the remarkable effects of a handle to one's name, and feeling cruelly neglected.

Suddenly she saw a fly coming up to the gate. There was a general peeping and wondering. Then Uncle Reginald and a stranger got out and came up to the door. There was a ring—everybody paused and wondered for a moment; then the maid tapped at the door and said, "Would Miss Mohun come and speak to Colonel Mohun a minute in the drawing-room?"

There was a hush of dread throughout the room. "Ah!" sighed Miss Hacket, looking at Gillian, and all the elders thought without saying that some terrible news of her father had to be told to the poor child. They let her go, frightened at the summons, but that idea not occurring to her.

"There!" said Uncle Regie, "she can set it straight. Don't be frightened, my dear; only tell this gentleman whether that is your writing."

The stranger held a strip so that she could only just see "Dolores M. Mohun," and she unhesitatingly answered "Yes"—very much surprised.

"You are sure?" said her uncle, in a tone of disappointment that made her falter, as she added, "I think so." At the same time the stranger turned the paper round, and she knew it for the cheque that had so long resided in her desk, but with dilated eyes, she exclaimed, "But—but—that was for seven pounds!"

"*That*," said the stranger, "then, Miss Mohun, you know this draft?"

"Only it was for seven," repeated Dolores.

"You mean, I conclude, that it was drawn for seven pounds, and that it was still for seven when it left your hands?"

"Yes," muttered Dolores, who was beginning to get very much frightened, at she knew not what, and to feel on her guard at all points.

"There's nothing to be afraid of, my dear," said Uncle Reginald, tenderly; "nobody suspects you of anything. Only tell us. Did your father give you this paper?"

"Yes."

"And when did you cash it?" asked the clerk.

Dolores hung her head. "I didn't," she said.

"But how did it get out of your possession?" said her uncle. "You are sure this is your own writing at the back. It could surely not have been stolen from her?" he added to the stranger.

"That could hardly be," said that person. "Miss Mohun, you had better speak out. To whom did you give this cheque?"

There was a whirl of terror all round about Dolores, a horror of bringing herself first, then Uncle Alfred, Constance, and everybody else into trouble. She took refuge in uttering not a word.

"Dolores," said her uncle, and his tone was now much more grave and less tender, thus increasing her terror; "this silence is of no use. Did you give this cheque to Mr. Flinders?"

In the silence, the ticks of the clock on the mantelpiece seemed like a hammer beating on her ears. Dolores thought of the morning's flat denial of all intercourse with Flinders! Then the word *give* occurred to her as a loophole, and her mind did not embrace all the consequences of the denial, she only saw one thing at a time, "I didn't *give* it," she answered, almost inaudibly.

"You did not give it?" repeated her uncle, getting angry and speaking loud. "Then how did it get into his hands? Is there no truth in you?" he added, after a pause, which only terrified her more and more. "Whom did you give it to?"

"Constance!" The word came out she hardly knew how, as something which at least was true. Colonel Mohun knocked at the door of the room she had come from. It was instantly opened, and Miss Hacket began, "The poor dear! Can I get anything for her, I am sure it is a terrible shock!" and as he stood, astonished, Gillian added, "Oh! I see it isn't *that*. We were afraid it was something about Uncle Maurice."

"No, my dear, no such thing. Only would Miss Constance Hacket be kind enough to come here a minute?"

"Oh! My apron! My fingers! Excuse me for being such a figure!" Constance ran on, as Colonel Mohun made her come across to the room opposite, where she looked about her in amazement. Was the stranger a publisher about to make her an offer for

the "Waif of the Moorland." But Dolores's downcast attitude and set, sullen face forbade the idea.

"Miss Constance Hacket," said the colonel, "here is an uncomfortable matter in which we want your assistance. Will you kindly answer a question or two from Mr. Ellis, the manager of the . . . . Bank?"

Then the manager politely asked her if she had seen the cheque before.

"Yes—why—what's wrong about it? Oh! It is for seventy! Why, Dolores, I thought it was only for seven?"

"It was for seven when you parted with it, then, Miss Hacket," said the manager; "let me ask whether you changed it yourself?"

"No," she said, "I sent it to——" and there she came to a dead pause, in alarm.

"Did you send it to Mr. Alfred Flinders?" said Mr. Ellis.

"Yes—oh!" another little scream, "He can't have done it. He can't be such a villain! Your own uncle, Dolores."

"He is no uncle of Dolores Mohun!" said the colonel. "He is only the son of her mother's stepmother by her first marriage."

"Oh, Dolores, then you deceived me!" exclaimed Constance; "you told me he was your own uncle, or I would never—and oh! my fifteen pounds. Where is he?"

"That, madam," said Mr. Ellis, gravely, "I hope the police may discover. He has quitted Darminster

after having cashed this cheque for seventy pounds. We have already telegraphed to the police to be on the look out for him, but I much fear that it will be too late."

"Oh! my fifteen pounds! What shall I do? Oh, Dolores, how could you? I shall never trust any one again!"

Perhaps Uncle Reginald felt the same, but he only darted a look upon his niece, which she felt in every nerve, though to his eyes she only stood hard and stolid. The manager, who found Constance's torrent of words as hard to deal with as Dolores's silence, asked for pen and ink, and begged to take down Miss Hacket's statement to lay before a magistrate in case of Flinders's apprehension. It was not very easy to keep her to the point, especially as her chief interest was in her own fifteen pounds, of which Mr. Ellis only would say that she could prosecute the man for obtaining money on false pretences, and this she trusted meant getting it back again. As to the cheque in question, she told how Dolores had entrusted it to her to send to her supposed uncle, Mr. Flinders, to whom it had been promised the day they went to Darminster, and she was quite ready to depose that when it left her hands, it was only for seven pounds.

This was all that the bank manager wanted. He thanked her, told Colonel Mohun they should hear from him, and went off in a hurry, both to communicate with the police, and to leave the young

ladies to be dealt with by their friends, who, he might well suppose, would rather that he removed himself.

"Put on your hat, Dolores," said Colonel Mohun, gravely; "you had better come home with me! Miss Hacket, excuse me, but I am afraid I must ask whether you have been assisting in a correspondence between my niece and this Flinders?"

"Oh! Colonel Mohun, you will believe me, I was quite deceived. Dolores represented that he was her uncle, to whom she was much attached, and that Lady Merrifield separated her from him out of mere family prejudice."

"I am afraid you have paid dearly for your sympathy," said the colonel. "It certainly led you far when you assisted your friend to deceive the aunt who trusted you with her."

The movement that was taking place seemed like licence to that roomful, burning with curiosity to break out. Mysie was running after Dolores to ask if she could do anything for her, but Colonel Mohun called her back with "Not now, Mysie." Miss Hacket came forward with agitated hopes that nothing was amiss, and, at sight of her, Constance collapsed quite. "Oh, Mary," she cried out, "I have been so deceived! Oh! that man!" and she sunk upon a chair in a violent fit of crying, which alarmed Miss Hacket so dreadfully that she looked imploringly up to Colonel Mohun. He had meant to have left Miss Constance to explain, but he saw it was necessary to relieve the poor elder sister's mind from worse fears by saying,

"I am afraid it is my niece who deceived her, by leading her into forwarding letters and money to a person who calls himself a relation. He seems to have been guilty of a forgery, which may have unpleasant consequences. Children, I think you had better follow us home."

Dolores had come down by this time, and Colonel Mohun walked home, at some paces from her, very much as if he had been guarding a criminal under arrest. Poor Uncle Reginald! He had put such absolute trust in the two answers she had made him in the morning; and had been so sure of her good faith, that when the manager brought word that the cheque had heen traced to Flinders, who had absconded, he still held that it was a barefaced forgery, entirely due to Flinders himself, and that Dolores could show that she had no knowledge of it, and he had gone down in the fly expecting to come home triumphant, and confute his sister Jane, who persisted in being mournfully sagacious. And he was indignant in proportion to the confidence he had misplaced; grieved, too, for his brother's sake, and absolutely ashamed.

Once he asked, when they were within the paddock, out of the way of meeting any one, "Have you nothing to say to me, Dolores?"

It was not said in a manner to draw out an answer, and she made none at all.

Again he spoke, as they came near the house:

"You had better go up to your room at once. I

do not know how to think of the blow this will be to your father."

It was so entirely what Dolores was thinking of, that it seemed to her barbarous to tell her of it. In fact she was stunned, scarcely understanding what had happened, and too proud and miserable to ask for an explanation, for had not every one turned against her, even Uncle Reginald and Constance—and what had happened to that cheque?

She did not see Uncle Reginald turn into the drawing-room, and letting himself drop despairingly into an armchair, say, "Well, Jane, you were right, more's the pity!"

"She really gave him the cheque!"

"Yes, but at least it was only for seven. The rascal himself must have altered it into seventy. She and the other girl both agree as to that. There's been a clandestine correspondence going on with that scamp ever since she has been here, under cover to that precious friend of hers—that Hacket girl."

"Ah! you warned me, Jenny," said Lady Merrifield. "But I'm quite sure Miss Hacket knew nothing of it."

"I don't suppose she did. She seemed struck all of a heap. Any way they've quarrelled now; the other one has turned King's evidence—has lost some money too, and says Dolores deceived her. She's deceived every one all round, that's the fact. Why, she told me two flat lies this very morning—lies—there's no other name for it. What will you do with her, Lily?"

"I don't know," said Lady Merrifield, utterly shocked, and recollecting, but not mentioning, the falsehood told to her about the note. Lord Rotherwood said, "Poor child," and Colonel Mohun groaned, "Poor Maurice."

"Then she did go to Darminster?" said Miss Mohun.

"Yes; that came out from this Miss Constance, who seems to have been properly taken in about some publishing trash. Serve her right! But it seems Dolores beguiled her with stories about her dear uncle in distress. We left her nearly in hysterics, and I told the children to come away."

"What does Dolores say?" asked Jane.

"Nothing! I could not get a word out of her after the first surprise at the alteration of the cheque. Not a word nor a tear. She is as hard—as hard as a bit of stone."

"Really," said Lady Merrifield, "I can't help thinking there's a good deal of excuse for her."

"What? That poor Maurice's wife was half a heathen, and afterwards the girl was left to chance?" said Colonel Mohun. "I see no other. And you, Lily, are the last person I should expect to excuse untruth."

"I did not mean to do that, Regie; but you all say that poor Mary was fond of this man and helped him."

"That she did!" said Lord Rotherwood, "and very much against the grain it went with Maurice."

"Then don't you see that this poor child, who

probably never had the matter explained to her, may have felt it a great hardship to be cut off from the man her mother taught her to care for; and that may have led her into concealments?"

"Well!" said Colonel Mohun, "at that rate, at least one may be thankful never to have married."

"One—or two, Regie?" said Jane, as they all laughed at his sally. "I think I had better go up and see whether I can get anything out of the child. Do you mean to have her down to dinner, Lily," she added, glancing at the clock.

"Oh yes, certainly. I don't want to put her to disgrace before all the children and servants—that is, if she is not crying herself out of condition to appear, poor child."

"Not she," said Uncle Reginald.

On opening the door, the children were all discovered in the hall, in anxious curiosity, not venturing in uncalled, but very much puzzled.

Gillian came forward and said, "Mamma, may we know what is the matter?"

"I hardly understand it myself yet, my dear, only that Dolores and Constance Hacket have let themselves be taken in by a sort of relation of Dolores's mother, and Uncle Maurice has lost a good deal of money through it. It would not have happened if there had been fair and upright dealing towards me; but we do not know the rights of it, and you had better take no notice of it to her."

"I thought," said Valetta, sagaciously, "no good

could come of running after that stupid Miss Constance."

"Who can't pull a cracker, and screams at a daddy long-legs," added Fergus.

"But, mamma, what shall we do?" said Gillian. "I came away because Uncle Regie told us, and Constance was crying so terribly; but what is poor Miss Hacket to do? There is the tree only half dressed, and all the girls coming to-night, unless she puts them off."

"Yes, you had better go down alone as soon as dinner is over, and see what she would like," said Lady Merrifield. "We must not leave her in the lurch, as if we cast her off, though I am afraid Constance has been very foolish in this matter. Oh, Gillian, I wish we could have made Dolores happier amongst us, and then this would not have happened."

"She would never let us, mamma," said Gillian.

But Mysie, coming up close to her mother as they all went up the broad staircase to prepare for the midday meal, confessed in a grave little voice, "Mamma, I think I have sometimes been cross to Dolly—more lately, because *it* has been so very tiresome."

Lady Merrifield drew the little girl into her own room, stooped down, and kissed her, saying, "My dear child, these things need a great deal of patience. You will have to be doubly kind and forbearing now, for she must be very unhappy, and perhaps not like to show it. You might say a little prayer for her,

that God will help us to be kind to her, and soften her heart."

"Oh yes, mamma; and, please, will you set it down for me?"

"Yes, my dear, and for myself too. You shall have it before bed-time."

Aunt Jane had followed Dolores to her own room. The girl, who was sitting on her bed, dazed, regretted that she had not bolted her door, as her aunt entered with the words, "Oh, Dolores, I am very sorry, I could not have thought you would so have abused the confidence that was placed in you."

To this Dolores did not answer. To her mind she was the person ill-used by the prohibition of correspondence, but she could not say so. Every one was falling on her; but Aunt Jane's questions could not well help being answered.

"What will your father think of it?"

"He never forbade me to write to Uncle Alfred," said Dolores.

"Because he never thought of your doing such a thing. Did he give you this cheque?"

"Yes."

"For yourself?"

"N—n—o. But it was the same."

"What do you mean by that?"

"It was to pay a man—a man's that's dead."

"That may be; but what right did that give you to spend the money otherwise? Who was the man?"

"Professor Mühlwasser, for some books of plates."

"How do you know he is dead! Who told you so? Eh! Was it Flinders? Ah! you see what comes of trusting to an unprincipled man like that. If you had only been open and straightforward with Aunt Lily, or with any of us, you would have been saved from this tissue of falsehood; forfeiting your Uncle Reginald's good opinion, and enabling Flinders to do your father this great injury." She paused, and, as Dolores made no answer, she went on again—"Indeed, there is no saying what you have not brought on yourself by your deceit and disobedience. If Flinders is apprehended, you will have to appear against him in court, and publicly avow that you gave away what your father trusted to you."

Dolores gave a little moan and start, and her aunt, perceiving that she had touched an apparently vulnerable spot, proceeded—"The only thing left for you to do is to tell the whole story frankly and honestly. I don't say so only for the sake of showing Aunt Lily that you are sorry for having abused her confidence. I wish I could think that you are; but, unless we know all, we cannot shield you from any further consequences, and that of course we should wish to do, for your father's sake."

Dolores did not feel drawn to confession, but she knew that when Aunt Jane once set herself to ask questions, there was no use in trying to conceal anything. So she made answers, chiefly "Yes" or No," and her aunt, by severe and diligent pumping, had

extracted bit by bit what it was most essential should be known, before the gong summoned them. Dolores would rather have been a solitary prisoner, able to chafe against oppression, than have been obliged to come down and confront everybody; but she crept into the place left for her between Mysie and Wilfred. She had very little appetite, and never found out how Mysie was fulfilling her resolution of kindness by baulking Wilfred of sundry attempts to tease; by substituting her own kissing-crust for Dolly's more unpoetical piece of bread; and offering to exchange her delicious strawberry-jam tartlet for the black-currant one at which her cousin was looking with reluctant eyes.

Mysie and Valetta were grievously exercised about their chances of returning to the G.F.S. Tree. Indeed Gillian went the length of telling them that Fly was behaving far better in her disappointment as to the Butterfly's Ball than they were as to this "old second-hand tree." Fly laughed and observed, "Dear me, things one would like are always being stopped. If one was to mind every time, how horrid it would be! And there's always something to make up!"

Then it occurred to Gillian, though not to her younger sisters, that Lady Phyllis Devereux lived in general a much less indulged, and more frequently disappointed, life than did herself and her sisters.

However, there was great delight at that dinner-table. Jasper had ridden to get the letters of the second post, and Lord Rotherwood had his hands and

his head full of them when he came in to luncheon—there being what Lady Merrifield called a respectable dinner in view. In the first place, Lord Ivinghoe was getting on very well, and was up, sitting by the fire, playing patience. Nobody was catching the measles, and quarantine would be over on the 9th of January. Secondly, "Fly, shall you be very broken-hearted if I tell you."

"Oh, daddy, you wouldn't look like that if it was anything very bad! Lion isn't dead?"

"No; but I grieve to say your unnatural grandparents don't want you! Grandmamma is nervous about having you without mamma. What did we do last time we were there, Fly?"

"Don't you remember, daddy? they said there was nothing for me to ride to the meet, and you and Griffin put the side-saddle on Crazy Kate, and we went out with the hounds, and I've got the brush up in my room!"

"I don't wonder grandmamma is nervous," observed Lady Merrifield.

"Will you be nervous, Lily," said Lord Rotherwood, "if this same flyaway mortal is left on your hands till the 9th?"

Dinner, manners, silence before company, and all, could not repress a general scream of ecstacy, which called forth the reply. "I should think you and her mother were the people to be nervous.

"Oh! my lady has been duly instructed in Merrifield perfections, and esteems you a model mother."

The children's nods and smiles said "Hear, hear!"

"Well, you've got it all in her own letter," continued Lord Rotherwood. "You see, they've got a caucus at High Court, and a dinner, and I must go up there on Monday; but if you'll keep this dangerous Fly—— "

"I can answer for the pleasure it will give."

"Well then, I'll come back for her by the 9th, and you've Victoria's letter, haven't you?"

"Yes, it is very kind of her."

"Then I shall expect you to be ready to start with me for the Butterfly's Ball. Eh, young ladies, what will you come out as?"

"Oh daddy, daddy, is it? Has mamma asked them? Oh! it is more delicious than anything ever was. Mysie, Mysie, what will you be?"

"'The sly little dormouse crept out of his hole,'" quoted Mysie, in a very low, happy voice.

"And I will be a jolly old frog," shouted Fergus, finding the ordinance of silence broken and making the most of it, on the presumption that the whole family were invited. However, the tone, rather than the uncomprehended words of his mother's answer, "Nobody asked you, sir," she said, reduced him to silence, and it became understood, through Fly's inquiries, that the invitation included Lady Merrifield and three children, though the mother made it known that a promised visit from old Mrs. Merrifield must make her acceptance doubtful. And besides, the question which three were to go was the unspoken

drawback to full bliss, and yet the delight was exceedingly great in the prospect, great enough to make the contrast of gloom in poor Dolores's spirit all the darker, as she sat, left out of everything, and she could not now say, with absolute injustice, though she still clung to the belief that there was more misfortune than fault in her disgrace.

She crept away, shivering with unhappiness, to the schoolroom, while the others frisked off discussing the wonderful Butterfly's Ball. Lady Merrifield looked in on her, and she hardened herself to endure either another probing or fresh reproaches, but all she heard was, "My dear, I cannot talk over this sad affair now, as I have to go out. But, if you can, I think you had better write to your father about it, and let him understand exactly how it happened. Or, if you had rather write than speak in explaining it to me, you can do so, and we can consider to-morrow what is to be done about it."

Then she went out with her brother and cousin to drive to some Industrial schools which Lord Rotherwood wanted to see.

CHAPTER IV.

THE BUTTERFLY'S BALL.

MISS MOHUN went to the Casement Cottages with Gillian to see what the elder Miss Hacket might wish, and whether they could be of use to her; the young people being left to exercise themselves within call in case the Tree was to be continued.

This proved to be an act of great kindness, for poor Mary Hacket was suffering all the distress of an upright and honourable woman at her sister's abuse of confidence; and had felt as if Colonel Mohun's summons to his nieces was the close of all intimacy with such an unworthy household. Moreover, the evening's entertainment could not be given up, and Gillian was despatched to summon the eager assistants; while Aunt Jane repeated her assurances that Lady Merrifield perfectly understood Miss Hacket's sheer ignorance of the doings in Constance's room; listening patiently even when the tender-hearted woman began to excuse her sister for having accepted Dolores's lamentations at being cut off from her so-called uncle. "Dear Connie is so romantic, and so

easily touched," she said, "though, of course, it was very wrong of her to suppose that Lady Merrifield could do anything harsh or unkind. She is in great grief now, poor darling, she feels so bitterly that her friend led her into it by deceiving her about the relationship and character."

This, Aunt Jane did not think the worst part of the affair, and she said that the girl had been brought up to call the man Uncle Alfred, and very possibly did not understand that he was only so by courtesy, nor that he was so utterly untrustworthy.

"I thought so," said Mary Hacket. "I told Connie that such a child could not possibly have been a willing party to his fraud—for fraud, I fear, it was—Miss Mohun. Do you think there is any hope of her recovering the sum she advanced."

"I am afraid there is not, even if the wretched man is apprehended."

"Ah! if she had only told me what she wanted it for!"

"I hope it was all her own."

"Oh, Miss Mohun, no doubt you know that two sisters living together must accommodate one another a little, and Connie's dress expenses, at her age, are necessarily more than mine. But here come the dear children, and we ought to dismiss all painful subjects, though I declare I am so nervous I hardly know what I am about."

However, by Miss Mohun's help, the good lady rose to the occasion, and when once busy, the trouble was

thrown off, so that no guests would have detected how unhappy she had been in the forenoon. Constance soon came down, and confided to Gillian a parcel directed to Miss D. Mohun, containing all the notes written to her, and all the books lent to her, by the false friend whom she had cast off, after which she threw herself into the interests of the present.

The London ornaments, and the residue of the gifts and bonbons, made the Christmas-tree a most memorable one to the G.F.S. mind.

As to Fly, she fraternized to a great extent with a very small maid, in a very long, brown dress, and very thick boots, who did not taste a single bonbon, and being asked whether she understood that they were good to eat, replied that she was keeping them for "our Bertie and Minnie;" and, on encouragement, launched into such a description of her charges —the blacksmith's small children—that Lady Phyllis went back, not without regrets that she could not be a little nurse who had done with school at twelve years old, and spent her days at the back of a perambulator.

"Oh, daddy," she said, "I do wish you had come down; it was such lovely fun—the best tree I ever saw. Why wouldn't you come?"

"If thirty odd years should pass over that little head of yours, my Lady Fly, and you should then meet with Mysie and Val, maybe you will then learn the reason why."

"We will recollect that in thirty years' time."

"When our children go to a Christmas-tree."

"And we sit over the fire instead."

"Oh! but should we ever not care for a dear, delightful Christmas-tree?"

"If we had each other instead."

"Then we would all go still together!"

"And tell our little boys and girls all about this one, and the Butterfly's Ball!"

"Perhaps our husbands would want us, and not let us go."

"Oh! I don't want a husband. He'd be in the way. We'd send him off to India or somewhere, like Aunt Lily's."

"Don't, Fly; it is not at all nice to have papa away."

"Oh yes, it would be ten hundred times better if he were at home."

Such were the mingled sentiments of the triad, as they went upstairs to bed, linked together in their curious fashion.

Some time later, a bedroom discussion of affairs was held by Lady Merrifield and Miss Mohun, who had not had a moment alone together all day, to converse upon the two versions of the disaster which the latter had extracted from Dolores and Constance, and which fairly agreed, though Constance had been by far the most voluble, and somewhat ungenerously violent against her former friend, at least so Lady Merrifield remarked.

"You should take into account the authoress's disappointed vanity."

"Yes, poor thing! How he must have flattered her!"

"Besides, there is the loss of the money, which, I fear, falls as seriously on good Miss Hacket as on the goose herself."

"Does it, indeed? That must not be. How much is it?"

"Fifteen pounds; and that foolish Constance fancies that poor Dolores assisted in duping her. I really had to defend the girl; though I am just as angry myself when I watch her adamantine sullenness."

"I am the person to be angry with for having allowed the intimacy, in spite of your warnings, Jenny."

"You were too innocent to know what girls are made of. Oh yes, you are very welcome to have six of your own, but you might have six dozen without knowing what a girl brought up at a second-rate boarding-school is capable of, or what it is to have had no development of conscience. What shall you do? send her to school?"

"After that recommendation of yours?"

"I didn't propose a second-rate boarding-school, ma'am. There's a High School starting after the holidays at Rockstone. Let me have her, and send her there."

"Ada would not like it."

"Never mind Ada, I'll settle her. I would keep Dolly well up to her lessons, and prevent these friendships."

"I suppose you would manage her better than I have been able to do," said Lady Merrifield, reluctantly. "Yet I should like to try again; I don't want to let her go. Is it the old story of duty and love, Jane? Have I failed again through negligence and ignorance, and deceived myself by calling weakness and blindness love?"

"You don't fail with your own, Lily. Rotherwood runs about admiring them, and saying he never saw a better union of freedom and obedience. It was really a treat to see Gillian's ways to-night; she had so much consideration, and managed her sisters so well."

"Ah, but there's their father! I do so dread spoiling them for him before he comes home; but then he is a present influence with us all the time."

"They would all clap their hands if I carried Dolly off."

"Yes, and that is one reason I don't want to give her up; it seems so sad to send Maurice's child away leaving such an impression. One thing I am thankful for, that it will be all over before grandmamma and Bessie Merrifield come."

At that moment there was a knock at the door, and a small figure appeared in a scarlet robe, bare feet, and dishevelled hair.

"Mysie, dear child! What's the matter? who is ill?"

"Oh, please come, mamma, Dolly is choking and crying in such a dreadful way, and I can't stop her."

"I give up, Lily. This is mother-work," said Miss Mohun.

Hurrying upstairs, Lady Merrifield found very distressing sounds issuing from Dolores's room; sobs, not loud, but almost strangled into a perfect agony of choking down by the resolute instinct, for it was scarcely will.

"My dear, my dear, don't stop it!" she exclaimed, lifting up the girl in her arms. "Let it out; cry freely; never mind. She will be better soon, Mysie dear. Only get me a glass of water, and find a fresh handkerchief. There, there, that's right!" as Dolores let herself lean on the kind breast, and conscious that the utmost effects of the disturbance had come, allowed her long-drawn sobs to come freely, and moaned as they shook her whole frame, though without screaming. Her aunt propped her up on her own bosom, parted back her hair, kissed her, and saying she was getting better, sent Mysie back to her bed. The first words that were gasped out between the rending sobs were, "Oh! is my—he—to be tried?"

"Most likely not, my dear. He has had full time to get away, and I hope it is so."

"But wasn't he there? Haven't they got him? Weren't they asking me about him, and saying I must be tried for stealing father's cheque?"

"You were dreaming, my poor child. They have not taken him, and I am quite sure you will not be tried anyway."

"They said—Aunt Jane and Uncle Reginald and all, and that dreadful man that came——"

"Perhaps they said you might have to be examined, but only if *he* is apprehended, and I fully expect that he is out of reach, so that you need not frighten yourself about that, my dear."

"Oh, don't go!" cried Dolores, as her aunt stirred.

"No, I'm not going. I was only reaching some water for you. Let me sponge your face."

To this Dolores submitted gratefully, and then sighed, as if under heavy oppression, "And did he really do it?"

"I am afraid he must have done so."

"I never thought it. Mother always helped him."

"Yes, my dear, that made it very hard for you to know what was right to do, and this is a most terrible shock for you," said her aunt, feeling unable to utter another reproach just then to one who had been so loaded with blame, and she was touched the more when Dolores moaned, "Mother would have cared so much."

She answered with a kiss, was glad to find her hand still held, and forgot that it was past eleven o'clock.

"Please, will it quite ruin father?" asked Dolores, who had not out-grown childish confusion about large sums of money.

"Not exactly, my dear. It was more than he had in the bank, and Uncle Regie thinks the bankers will undertake part of the loss if he will let them. It is more inconvenient than ruinous."

"Ah!" There was a faintness and oppression in the sound which made Lady Merrifield think the girl ought not to be left, and before long, sickness came on, Nurse Halfpenny had to be called up, and it was one o'clock before there was a quiet, comfortable sleep, which satisfied the aunt and nurse that it was safe to repair to their own beds again.

The dreary, undefined self-reproach and vague alarms, intensified by the sullen, reserved temper, and culminating in such a shock, alienating the only persons she cared for, and filling her with terror for the future, could not but have a physical effect, and Dolores was found on the morrow with a bad headache, and altogether in a state to be kept in bed, with a fire in her room.

Gillian and Mysie were much impressed by the intelligence of their cousin's illness when they came to their mother's room on the way to breakfast, and Mysie turned to her sister, saying, "There Gill, you see she did care, though she didn't cry like us. Being ill is more than crying."

"Well," said Gillian, "it is a good deal more than such things as you and Val cry for, Mysie."

"It was a trial such as you don't understand, my dears," said Lady Merrifield. "I don't, of course, excuse much that she did, but she had been used to see her mother make every exertion to help the man."

"That does make a difference," said Gillian, "but she shouldn't have taken her father's money. And

wasn't it dreadful of Constance to smuggle her letters? I'm quite glad Constance gets part of the punishment."

"Certainly, that might be just, Gillian, but unfortunately the loss falls infinitely more heavily upon Miss Hacket, who cannot afford the loss at all."

"Oh dear!" cried Mysie.

"I'm very sorry," said Gillian.

"And, my dear girls, in all honour and honesty, we must make it up to her."

"Can't we save it out of our allowance?" said Mysie.

"Sixpence a month from you, a shilling perhaps from Gill, how long would that take? No, my dear girls, I am going to put you to a heavy trial."

"Oh, mamma, don't!" cried Gillian, seeing what she was driving at. "Don't give up the Butterfly's Ball."

"Oh, don't!" implored Mysie, tears starting in her eyes. "We never saw a costume ball, and Fly wishes it so."

"And I thought you had promised," said Gillian.

"Cousin Rotherwood assumes that I did; but I did not really accept. I told him I could not tell, for you know your Grandmamma Merrifield talked of coming here, and I cannot put her off. And now I see that it must be given up."

"It need only be calico!" sighed Gillian, sticking pins in and out of the pincushion.

"Fancy dresses even in calico are very expensive. Besides, I could not go to a place like Rotherwood

without at least two new dresses, and it is not right to put papa to more expense."

"Oh, mamma! couldn't you? You always do look nicer than any one," said Mysie.

"My dear, I am afraid nothing I have at present would be suitable for a General's wife at Lady Rotherwood's party, and we must think of what would be fitting both towards our hostess and papa. Don't you see?"

"Ah! your velvet dress!" sighed Gillian.

"My poor old faithful state apparel," smiled Lady Merrifield. "Poor Gill, you did not think again to have to mourn for it, but I don't know that even that could have been sufficiently revivified, though it was my *cheval de bataille* for so many years.

For Lady Merrifield's black velvet of many years' usefulness, had been put on for her *p.p.c.* party at Belfast, when Gillian, in abetting Jasper in roasting chestnuts over a paraffin-lamp, had set herself and the tablecloth on fire, and had been extinguished with such damages as singed hair, a scar on Jasper's hands, and the destruction of her mother's "front breadth." There had been such relief and thankfulness at its being no worse that the "state apparel" had not been much mourned, especially as the remains made a charming pelisse for Primrose; and, in the retirement of Silverton, it had not been missed till the present occasion.

"Do gowns cost so very much?" said Mysie.

"Indeed they do, my poor Mouse. The lamented

cost more than twenty pounds. I had been thinking whether I could afford the requisite garments—not quite so costly—and thought I might get them for about sixteen, with contrivance; but you see I feel it my fault that I let Dolores go and lead Constance to get cheated, and I cannot take the money out of what papa gives for household expenses and your education, so it must come out of my own personal allowance. Don't you see?"

"Ye—es," said Gillian, apparently intent on getting a big, black-headed pin repeatedly into the same hole, while Mysie was trying with all her might not to cry.

"You are thinking it is very hard that you should suffer for Dolly's faults. Perhaps it is, but such things may often happen to you, my dears. Christians bear them well for love's sake, you know."

"And it is a little my fault," said Gillian, thoughtfully; "for it was I that let the chestnut fall into the lamp."

"I—I don't think I should have minded so much," said Mysie, almost crying, "if we had done it our own selves—and Fly too—for some very poor woman in the snow."

"I know that very well, Mysie, and this is a much harder trial, as you don't get the honour and glory of it; and, besides, you will have to take care to say not a word of this reason to Fly or Valetta, or any one else."

"Val will be awfully disappointed," said Gillian.

"Poor Val! But I should not have taken her anyway, so that matters the less. I should have taken Jasper, for that would have been more convenient than so many girls. In fact, I did not mean anybody to have heard of it till I had made up my mind, so that there would have been no disappointment; but that naughty Cousin Rotherwood could not keep it to himself; and so, my poor maidens, you have to bear it with a good grace, and to be treated as my confidential friends."

Mysie smiled and kissed her mother—Gillian cleared somewhat, but observing, "I only wish it wasn't clothes;" tried to dismiss the subject as the gong began to sound, but Mysie caught her mother's dress, and said, "Mayn't I tell Fly, for a great secret?"

"No, my dear, certainly not. Fly is a dear little girl, but we don't know how she can keep secrets, and it would never do to let the Rotherwoods know; papa and Uncle William would be exceedingly annoyed. And only think of Miss Hacket's feelings if it came round. It will be hard enough to get her to take it now."

"Perhaps she won't," flashed into the minds of both girls; but Mysie said entreatingly, "One moment more, mamma, please! What can I say to Fly that will be the truth?"

"Say that I find we cannot go, and that I had never promised," said Lady Merrifield. "I trust you, my dears."

And as she opened the door to hurry down to prayers, the two sisters felt the words very precious and inspiriting. Mysie lingered on the step and bravely asked Gillian whether her eyes looked like crying—

"No, only a little twinkly," answered the elder sister; "they will be all right after prayers if you don't rub them."

"No, I won't, said Mysie; "I'll try to mean 'Thy will be done.' For I suppose it is His will, though it is mamma's."

"I'm glad you thought of that, Mysie," said Gillian; "you see it is mamma's goodness." And Gillian added to herself, "dear little Mysie too. If it had not been for her, I believe I should have 'grizzled' all prayer-time, and now I hope I shall attend instead."

When everybody rose up from their knees, Lady Merrifield was glad to see two fairly cheerful faces. She tried to lessen the responsibility of the confidants, and to get the matter settled by telling Lord Rotherwood at once and publicly that she had thought his kind invitation over, and that she found she must not accept it. Perhaps she warily took the moment after she had seen the postman coming up the drive, for he had only time to say, "Now, that's too bad, Lily, you don't mean it," and she to answer, "Yes, in sad earnest, I do," before the letters came in, and the attention of the elders was taken off by the distribution.

But Valetta whispered to Gillian, "Not going; oh, why?"

"No; never mind, you wouldn't have gone, anyway—hush—" said Gillian, beginning, it may be, a little sharply, but then becoming dismayed as Valetta, perhaps a little unhinged by the late pleasures, burst forth into such a fit of crying as made everybody look up, and her mother tell her to go away if she could not behave better. Gillian, understanding a sign of the head as permission, led her away, hearing Lord Rotherwood observe,—

"There, you cruel party!" before again becoming absorbed in his letter.

"Oh dear!" sighed Fly, turning to Mysie as they rose from table, "I am so sorry! It would have been so nice; and I thought we were safe, as mamma had written herself!"

"Ah! but my mamma hadn't accepted," said Mysie.

Phyllis seemed to take this as final, and sighed, but Mysie presently exclaimed, "I say! can't we all play at Butterfly's Ball in the hall after lessons?"

"Lessons?" said Fly; "but it's holiday-time?"

"Mamma always makes us do a sort of little lesson, even in the holidays, as she says we get naughty. But I suppose you need not; and perhaps she will not make us now you are here."

Colonel Mohun and Lord Rotherwood were going to Darminster to see what was the state of the investigation about Mr. Flinders. They set out directly

after breakfast, and after the feeding of the pets, where Valetta joined them, much consoled by the prospect of the extemporary Butterfly's Ball at home, Lady Phyllis, with her usual ready adaptability, repaired with the others to the schoolroom, where the Psalms and Lessons were read, and a small amount of French reading in turn from "En Quarantaine" followed, with accompaniment of needlework or drawing, after which the children were free.

Aunt Jane was going home to her Sunday school and the Rockstone festivities. She came down for her final talk with her sister just in time to perceive the folding up of three five-pound notes.

"Lily," she said, with instant perception, "I could beat myself for what I told you yesterday."

Lady Merrifield laughed. "The girls are very good about it!" she said. "Now you have found it out, see whether that note will make Miss Hacket swallow it."

"Can't be better! But oh, Lily, it is disgusting! Could not I rig up something fanciful for the children?"

"That's not so much the point. 'The General's lady,' as Mrs. Halfpenny would say, is bound not to look like 'ane scrub,' as she would be unwelcome to Victoria, and what would be William's feelings? I could hardly have accomplished it even with this, and the catastrophe settles the matter."

"You could not get into my black satin?"

"No, I thank you, my dear little Brownie," said

Lady Merrifield, elongating herself like a girl measuring heights.

"Ada has a larger assortment, as well as a taller person," continued Miss Jane, "but then they are rather 'kenspeckle,' and they have all made their first appearance at Rotherwood."

"No, no, thank you, my dear, Jasper would not like the notion—even if there was not more of me than of Ada. I have no doubt it is much better for us."

"Should you have liked it, Lily?"

"For once in a way, for Rotherwood's sake, dear old fellow. Yes, I should."

"Ah, well! You are a bit of a *grande dame* yourself. Ada enjoys it, too, or I don't think I ever should go there."

"Surely Victoria behaves well to you?"

"Far be it from me to say she is not exemplary in her perfect civility to all her husband's relations. Ada thinks her charming; but oh, Lily, you've never found out what it is to be a little person in a great person's house, and to feel one's self scrupulously made one of the family, because her husband is so much attached to all of them. There's nothing spontaneous about it! I dare say you would get on better, though. You are not a country-town old maid; you would have an air of the world and of distinction even if you went in your old grey poplin."

"Well, I thought better of my lady."

"You ought not! She makes great efforts, I am

sure, and is a pattern of graciousness and cordiality —only that's just what riles one, when one knows one is just as well born, and all the rest of it. And then I'm provided with the clever men, and the philanthropical folk to talk to. I know it's a great compliment, and they are very nice, but I'd ten times rather take my chance among them. However, now I've made the grapes sour for you, what do you think about Dolores? Will you send her to us?"

"Not immediately, at any rate, dear Jane. It is very kind in you to wish to take her off our hands, but I *do* want to try her a little longer. I thought she seemed to be softening last night."

"She was as hard as ever when I went in to wish her good-bye."

"I thought she had too much headache for conversation when I went in last; I think this is a regular upset from unhappiness and reserve."

"Alias temper and deceitfulness."

"Something of both. You know the body often suffers when things are not thrown out in a wholesome explosion at once, but go simmering on; and I mean to let this poor child alone till she is well."

"Ah! here comes the pony-carriage. Well, Lily, send her to me if you repent."

The sisters came out to find the Butterfly's Ball in full action. Fly had become a Butterfly by the help of a battered pair of fairy wings, stretched on wire, which were part of the theatrical stock. "The shy little Dormouse" was creeping about on all fours

under a fur jacket, with a dilapidated boa for a long tail, but her "blind brother the Mole" had escaped from her, and had been transformed into the Frog, by means of a spotted handkerchief over his back, and tremendous leap-frog jumps. Primrose, in another pair of fairy wings, was personating the Dragon-fly and all his relations, "green, orange, and blue." Valetta, in perfect content with the present, with a queer pair of ears, and a tail made of an old brush, sat up and nibbled as Squirrel. The Grasshopper was performing antics which made him not easily distinguishable from the Frog, and the Spider was actually descending by a rope from the balusters, while his mother, standing somewhat aghast, breathed a hope that "poor Harlequin's" fall was not part of the programme. But she did not interfere, having trust in the gymnastics that were studied at school by Jasper, who had been beguiled into the game by Fly's fascinations.

"A far more realistic performance than the Rotherwood Butterfly's Ball is likely to be," said Aunt Jane, aside, as the various guests came up for her departing kiss. "And much more entertaining, if they could only think so. Where's Gillian?"

Gillian appeared on the stairs in her own person at the moment. She said Mrs. Halfpenny had called her, and told her that "Miss Dollars" was crying, and that she did not think the child ought to be left alone long to fret herself, but Saturday morning needments called away nurse herself, so she had

ordered in Miss Gillian as her substitute. Gillian was reading to her, and had only come away to make her farewells to Aunt Jane.

"That is right, my dear," said her mother; "I will come and sit with her after luncheon."

For the whole youthful family were to turn out to superintend the replantation of the much-enduring fir, which, it was hoped, might survive for many another Christmas.

However, Lady Merrifield could not keep her promise, for a whole party of visitors arrived just after the children's dinner was over.

"And it's old Mrs. Norgood," sighed Gillian, looking over the balusters, "and she always stays for ages!"

"One of you young ladies must bide with Miss Dollars," said Nurse Halfpenny, decidedly, "or we shall have her fretting herself ill again."

"Oh, nursie, can't you?" entreated Gillian.

"Me, Miss Gillian! How can I, when Miss Primrose is going out with the whole clanjamfrie, and all the laddies, into the wet plantations? Na—one of ye maun keep the lassie company. Ye've had your turn, Miss Gillian, so it should be Miss Mysie. It winna hurt ye, bairn, ye that hae been rampauging ower the house all the morning."

Mysie knew it was her turn, but she also knew that nurse always favoured Gillian and snubbed her. She had a devouring longing to be with her dear Fly, and a certain sense that she was the preferred one,

Must another pleasure be sacrificed to that very naughty Dolores, whose misdemeanours had deprived them of the visit to Rotherwood. She looked so dismal that Gillian said good-naturedly, "Really, Mysie, I don't think mamma would mind Dolores's being left a little while; I must go down to see about the Tree, because mamma gave me a message to old Webb, but I'll come back directly. Or perhaps Dolly is going to sleep, and does not want any one. Go and see."

Mysie on this crept quietly into the room, full of hope of escape, but Dolores was anything but asleep. "Oh, are you come, Mysie? Now you'll go on with the story. I tried, but my eyes ache at the back of them, and I can't."

Mysie's fate was sealed. She sat down by the fire, and took up the book, "A Story for the Schoolroom," one of the new ones given from the Tree. It was the middle of the story, and she did not care about it at first, especially when she heard Fly's voice, and all the others laughing and chattering on the stairs.

"Didn't they care for her absence?" and her voice grew thick, and her eyes dim; but Dolores must not think her cross and unwilling, and she made a great effort, became interested in the girls there described, and wondered whether staying with Fly would have turned her head, after the example of the heroine of the book.

Dolores did not seem to want to talk. In fact, she was clinging to the reading, because she could not

bear to speak or think of the state of affairs, and the story seemed, as it were, to drown her misery. She knew that her aunt and cousins were far less severe with her than she expected, but that could only be because she was ill. Had not Uncle Reginald turned against her, and Constance? It would all come upon her as soon as she came out of her room, and she was rather sorry to believe that she should be up and about to-morrow morning.

Mysie read on till the short, winter day showed the first symptoms of closing in. Then Lady Merrifield came up. "You here, little nurse?" she said. "Run out now and meet the others. I'll stay with Dolly." Mysie knew by the kiss that her mother was pleased with her; but Dolores dreaded the talk with her aunt, and made herself sleepy.

CHAPTER V.

THE INCONSTANCY OF CONSTANCE.

THE two gentlemen who had gone to Darminster brought home tidings that the police who had been put on the track of Flinders had telegraphed that it was thought that a person answering to his description had embarked at Liverpool in an American-bound steamer.

This idea, though very uncertain, was a relief, at least to all except the boys, who thought it a great shame that such a rascal should escape, and wanted to know whether the Americans could not be made to give him up. They did not at all understand their elders being glad, for the sake of Maurice Mohun and his dead wife, that the man should not be publicly convicted, and above all that Dolores should not have to bear testimony against him in court, and describe her own very doubtful proceedings. Besides, there would have been other things to try him for, since he had cheated the publishing house which employed him of all he had been able to get into his hands. There was reason to believe that he had heavy debts, especially gambling ones, and that he had become

desperate since he no longer had his step-sister to fall back upon.

Looking into his room, among other papers, a half-burnt manuscript was found upon his grate among some exhausted cinders, as if he had been trying to use the unfortunate "Waif of the Moorland" to eke out his last fire. Moreover, the proprietor of the *Politician* told Colonel Mohun of having remonstrated with him on the exceeding weakness and poorness of the "Constantia" poetry, "which," as that indignant personage added, "was evidently done merely as a lure to the unfortunate young lady."

The fifteen pounds had been accepted in an honourable and ladylike manner by the elder sister—but without any overpowering expression of gratitude. No doubt it was a bitter pill to her, forced down by necessity, and without guessing that it cost the donors anything.

Dolores's mind was set at rest as to Flinders's evasion before night, and on the Sunday morning even Nurse Halfpenny could find out nothing the matter with her, so that she was obliged to make her appearance as usual. Uncle Reginald did not kiss her, he only gave a cold nod, and said "Good morning." Otherwise all went on as usual, and it was pleasant to find that Fly was as entirely used as they were to learning Collect and hymn, and copying out texts illustrating Catechism, and that she was expected to have them ready to repeat them to her mother some time in the afternoon. There was something, too, that Mysie

could not have described, but which she liked, in the manner in which, on this morning, Dolores accepted small acts of good nature, such as finding a book for her, getting a new pen and helping her to the whereabouts of a Scriptural reference. It seemed for the first time as if she liked to receive a kindness, and her "thank you" really had a sound of thanks, instead of being much more like "I wish you would not." Mysie felt really encouraged to be kind, and when, on setting forth to church, everybody was crowding round trying to walk with Fly, and Dolores was going along lonely and deserted, Mysie resigned her chance of one side of the favourite Phyllis, and dropped back to give her company to the solitary one. To her surprise and gratification, Dolores took hold of her hand, and listened quite willingly to her chatter about the schemes for the fortnight that Fly was to be left with them. Presently Constance was seen going markedly by the other gate of the churchyard, quite out of her usual way, and not even looking towards them.

It was the last day of the old year, and, in the midst of the Christmas joy, there were allusions to it in the services and hymns. Something in the tune of "Days and moments quickly flying," touched some chord in Dolores's spirit, and set her off crying. She would have done anything to stop it, but there was no helping it, great round splashes came down, and the more she was afraid of being noticed, the worse the choking grew. At last, the very worst person—

she thought—to take notice, Uncle Reginald, did so, and, under cover of a general rising, said sternly, "Stop that, or go out."

Stop that! Much did the colonel know about a girl's tears, or how she would have given anything to check them. But here was Aunt Lily edging down to her, taking her by the hand, leading her out, she did not know how, stopping all who would have come after them with help—then pausing a little in the open, frosty air.

"Oh, Aunt Lily! I am very sorry!"

"Never mind that, my dear. Do you feel poorly?"

"Oh no; I'm quite well—only——"

"Only overcome—I don't wonder—my dear—can you walk quietly home with me?"

"Yes, please."

Nothing was said till they had passed the "idle corner," where men and half-grown lads smoked their pipes in anything but Sunday trim; and stared at the lady making her exit, till they were through the short street with shop windows closed, and a strong atmosphere of cooking, and had come into the quiet lane leading to the paddock. Then Lady Merrifield laid her hand on the girl's shoulder very gently, and said, "It was too much for you, my dear, you are not quite strong yet."

"Oh yes; I'm well. Only I am so very—very miserable," and the gust of sobs and tears rushed on her again.

"Dear child, I should like to be able to help you!"

"You can't! I've done it! And—and they'll all be against me always—Uncle Regie and all!"

"Uncle Regie was very much hurt, but I'm sure he will forgive you when he sees how sorry you are. You know we all hope this is going to be a fresh start. I am sure you were deceived."

"Yes," said Dolores. "I never could have thought he—Uncle Alfred—was such a dreadful man."

"I expect that since he lost your mother's influence and help he may have sunk lower than when you had seen him before. Did your father give you any directions about him?"

"No. Father hated to hear of him, and never spoke about him if he could help it; and we thought it was all Mohun high notions because he wasn't quite a gentleman."

"I see. Indeed, my dear, though you have done very wrong, I have already felt that there was great excuse for you in trying to keep up intercourse with a person who belonged to your mother. I wish you had told me, but I suppose you were afraid."

"Yes," said Dolores. "And I thought you were sure to be cross and harsh," she muttered. And then suddenly looking up, "Oh, Aunt Lily! everybody is angry but you—you and Mysie! Please go on being kind! I believe you've been good to me always."

"My dear, I've tried," said Lady Merrifield, with tears in her brown eyes and a choke in her voice, caressing the hand that had been put into hers. "I

have wished very much to make you happy with us; but the ways of a large family must be a trial to a new-comer."

Dolores raised her face for a kiss, and said, "I see it now. But I did not like everything always, and I thought aunts were sure to be unkind."

"That was very hard. And why?"

She was heard to mutter something about aunts in books always being cross.

"Ah! my dear! I suppose there are some unkind aunts, but I am sure there are a great many more who wish with all their hearts to make happy homes for their nieces. I hope now we may do so. I have more hope than ever I had, and so I shall write to your father."

"And please—please," cried Dolores, "don't let Uncle Regie write him a very dreadful letter! I know he will."

"I think you can prevent that best yourself, by telling Uncle Regie how sorry you are. He was specially grieved because he thinks you told him two direct falsehoods."

"Oh! I didn't think they were *that*," said Dolores, "for it was true that father did not leave anything with me for Uncle Alfred. And I did not know whether it was me whom he saw at Darminster. I did tell you one once, Aunt Lily, when you asked if I gave Constance a note. At least, she gave it to me, and not I to her. Indeed, I don't tell falsehoods, Aunt Lily—I mean I never did at home, but Constance

said everybody said those sort of things at school, and that one was driven to it when one was—— "

"Was what, my dear?"

"Tyrannized over," Dolores got out.

"Ah! Dolly, I am afraid Constance was no real friend. It was a great mistake to think her like Miss Hacket."

"And now she has sent back all my notes, and won't look at me or speak to me," and Dolores's tears began afresh.

"It is very ungenerous of her, but very likely she will be very sorry to have done so when her first anger is over, and she understands that you were quite as much deceived as she was."

"But I shall never care for her again. It is not like Mysie, who never stopped being kind all the time —nor Gillian either. I shall cut her next time!"

"You should remember that she has something to forgive. I don't want you to be intimate with her, but I think it would be better if, instead of quarrelling openly, you wrote a note to say that you were deceived, and that you are very sorry for what you brought on her."

"I should not have gone on with it but for her and her stupid poems!"

"Can you bear to tell me how it all was, my dear? I do not half understand it."

And on the way home, and in Lady Merrifield's own room, Dolores found it a relief to pour forth an explanation of the whole affair, beginning with that

meeting with Mr. Flinders at Exeter, of which no one had heard, and going on to her indignation at the inspection of her letters; and how Constance had undertaken to conduct her correspondence, "and that made it seem as if she must write to some one,"—so she wrote to Uncle Alfred. And then Constance, becoming excited at the prospect of a literary connection, all the rest followed. It was a great relief to have told it all, and Lady Merrifield was glad to see that the sense of deceit was what weighed most heavily upon her niece, and seemed to have depressed her all along. Indeed, the aunt came to the conclusion that though Dolores alone might still have been sullen, morose and disagreeable, perhaps very reserved, she never would have kept up the systematic deceit but for Constance. The errors, regarded as sin, weighed on Lady Merrifield's mind, but she judged it wiser not to press that thought on an unprepared spirit, trusting that just as Dolores had wakened to the sense of the human love that surrounded her, hitherto disbelieved and disregarded, so she might yet awake to the feeling of the Divine love and her offence against it.

The afternoon was tolerably free, for the gentlemen, including the elder boys, walked to evensong at a neighbouring church noted for its musical services, and Lady Merrifield, as she said, "lashed herself up" to go with Gillian, carry back the remnant of the unhappy "Waif," and "have it out" with Constance, who would, she feared, never otherwise understand the measure of her own delinquency, and from whom,

perhaps, evidence might be extracted which would palliate the poor child's offence in the eyes of Colonel Mohun. Both the Hacket sisters looked terribly frightened when she appeared, and the elder one made an excuse for getting her outside the door to beseech her to be careful, dear Constance was so nervous and so dreadfully upset by all she had undergone. Lady Merrifield was not the least nervous of the two, and she felt additionally displeased with Constance for not having said one word of commiseration when her sister had inquired for Dolores. On returning to the drawing-room, Lady Merrifield found the young lady standing by the window, playing with the blind, and looking as if she wanted to make her escape.

"I do not know whether you will be sorry or glad to see this," said Lady Merrifield, producing a half-burnt roll of paper. "It was found in Mr. Flinders's grate, and my brother thought you would be glad that it should not get into strange hands."

"Oh, it was cruel! it was base! What a wicked man he is!" cried Constance, with hot tears, as she beheld the mutilated condition of her poor "Waif."

"Yes, it was a most unfortunate thing that you should have run into intercourse with such an utterly untrustworthy person."

"I was grossly deceived, Lady Merrifield!" said Constance, clasping her hands somewhat theatrically. "I shall never believe in any one again!"

"Not without better grounds, I hope," was the

answer. "Your poor little friend is terribly broken down by all this."

"Don't call her my friend, Lady Merrifield. She has used me shamefully! What business had she to tell me he was her uncle when he was no such thing?"

"She had been always used to call him so."

"Don't tell me, Lady Merrifield," said Constance, who, after her first fright, was working herself into a passion. "You don't know what a little viper you have been warming, nor what things she has been continually saying of you. She told me——"

Lady Merrifield held up her hand with authority.

"Stay, Constance. Do you think it is generous in you to tell me this?"

"I am sure you ought to know."

"Then why did you encourage her?"

"I pitied her—I believed her—I never thought she would have led me into this!"

"How did she lead you?"

"Always talking about her precious, persecuted uncle. I believe she was in league with him all the time!"

"That is nonsense," said Lady Merrifield, "as you must see if you reflect a little. Dolores was too young to have been told this man's real character; she only knew that her mother, who had spent her childhood with him, treated him as a brother, and did all she could for him. Dolores did very wrongly and foolishly in keeping up a connection with him unknown

to me; but I cannot help feeling there was great excuse for her, and she was quite as much deceived as you were."

"Oh, of course, you stand by your own niece, Lady Merrifield. If you knew what horrid things she said about your pride and unkindness, as she called it, you would not think she deserved it."

"Nay, that is exactly what does most excuse her in my eyes. Her fancying such things of me was what did prevent her from confiding in me."

Constance had believed herself romantic, but the Christian chivalry of Lady Merrifield's nature was something quite beyond her. She muttered something about Dolores not deserving, which made her visitor really angry, and say, "We had better not talk of deserts. Dolores is a mere child—a motherless child, who had been a good deal left to herself for many months. I let her come to you because she seemed shy and unhappy with us, and I did not like to deny her the one pleasure she seemed to care for. I knew what an excellent person and thorough lady your sister is, and I thought I could perfectly trust her with you. I little thought you would have encouraged her in concealment, and—I must say—deceit, and thus made me fail in the trust her father reposed in me."

"I would never have done it," Constance sobbed, "but for what she said about you, Lady Merrifield!"

"Well, and even if I am such a hard, severe person, does that make it honourable or right to help the

child I trusted to you to carry on this underhand correspondence?"

Constance hung her head. Her sister had said the same to her, but she still felt herself the most injured party, and thought it very hard that she should be so severely blamed for what the girls at her school treated so lightly. She said, "I am very sorry, Lady Merrifield," but it was not exactly the tone of repentance, and it ended with: "If it had not been for her, I should never have done it."

"I suppose not, for there would have been no temptation. I was in hopes that you would have shown some kindlier and more generous feeling towards the younger girl, who could not have gone so far wrong without your assistance, and who feels your treatment of her very bitterly. But to find you incapable of understanding what you have done, makes me all the more glad that the friendship—if friendship it can be called—is broken off between you. Good-bye. I think when you are older and wiser, you will be very sorry to recollect the doings of the last few months."

Lady Merrifield walked away, and found on her return that Dolores had succeeded in writing to her father, and was so utterly tired out by the feelings it had cost her that she was only fit to lie on the sofa and sleep.

Gillian was, of course, not seen till she came home from evening service.

"Oh, mamma," she said, "what did you do to Constance?"

"Why?"

"Well, I heard you shut the front door. And presently after there came such a noise through the wall that all the girls pricked up their ears, and Miss Hacket jumped up in a fright. If it had been Val, one would have called it a naughty child roaring."

"What! did I send her into hysterics?"

"I suppose, as she is grown up, it must have the fine name, but it wasn't a bit like poor Dolly's choking. I am sure she did it to make her sister come! Well, of course, Miss Hacket went away, and I did the best I could, but what could one do with all these screeches and bellowings breaking out?"

"For shame, Gill!"

"I can't help it, mamma. If you had only seen their faces when the uproar came in a fresh gust! How they whispered, and some looked awe-struck. I thought I had better get rid of them, and come home myself; but Miss Hacket met me, and implored me to stay, and I was weak-minded enough to do so. I wish I hadn't, for it was only to be provoked past bearing. That horrid girl has poisoned even Miss Hacket's mind, and she thinks you have been hard on her darling. You did not know how nervous and timid dear Connie is!"

"Well, Gill, I confess she made me very angry, and I told her what I thought of her."

"And that she didn't choose to hear!"

"Did you see her again?"

"No, I am thankful to say, I did not. But Miss

Hacket would go on all tea-time, explaining and explaining for me to tell you how dear Connie is so affectionate and so easily led, and how Dolores came over her with persuasions, and deceived her. I declare I never liked Dolly so well before. At any rate, she doesn't make professions, and not a bit more fuss than she can help. And there was Miss Hacket getting brandy cherries and strong coffee, and I don't know what all, because dear Connie was so overcome, and dear Lady Merrifield was quite under a mistake, and so deceived by Dolores. I told Miss Hacket you were never under a mistake nor deceived."

"You didn't, Gillian!"

"Yes, I did, and the stupid woman only wanted to kiss me (but I wouldn't let her) and said I was very right to stand up for my dear mamma. As if that had anything to do with it! What are you laughing at, mamma? Why, Uncle Regie is laughing, and Cousin Rotherwood! What is it?"

"At the two partisans who never stand up for their own families," said Uncle Regie.

"But it's true!" cried Gillian.

"What! that I am never mistaken nor deceived?" said Lady Merrifield.

"Except when you took Miss Constance for a sensible woman, eh?" said her brother.

"That I *never* did! But I did take her for a moderately honourable one."

"Well, that was a mistake," owned Gillian. "And Miss Hacket is as bad! There's no gratitude——"

"Hush!" broke in her mother; and Gillian stopped abashed, while Lady Merrifield continued, "I won't have Miss Hacket abused. She is only blinded by sisterly affection."

"I don't think I can go there again," said Gillian, "after what she said about you."

"Nonsense!" said her mother. "Don't be as bad as Constance in trying to make me angry by telling me all poor Dolly's grumblings."

"Follow your mother's example, Gillian," said Lord Rotherwood, "and, if possible, never hear, certainly never attend to, what any one says of you behind your back."

"Is said to have said of you, you should add, Rotherwood," put in the colonel. "It is a degree worse than eavesdropping."

"Oh, Regie!" exclaimed his sister.

"Well, not perhaps for your own honour and conscience, but the keyhole is a more trustworthy medium than the reporter."

"That's a strong way of stating it, but, at any rate, the keyhole has no temper nor imagination, or prejudice of its own," said Lady Merrifield.

"No, and as far as it goes, it enables you to judge of the frame in which the words, even if correctly reported, were spoken," added Colonel Mohun.

"The moral of which is," said Lord Rotherwood, drolly, "that Gillian is not to take notice of any one's observations upon her unless she has heard them through the keyhole."

"And so one would never hear them at all."

"Q. E. D.," said Lord Rotherwood. "And now, Lily, do you ever sing the two evening-hymns, Ken and Keble, now, as the family used to do on Sundays at the Old Court, long ere the days of "Hymns Ancient and Modern"?

"Don't we?" said Lady Merrifield. "Only all our best voices will be singing it at Rawul Pindee!"

And, as she struck a note on the piano, all the younger people still up, Mysie, Phyllis, Wilfred and Valetta, gathered round from the outer room to join in their evening Sunday delight. Fly put her hand into her father's and whispered, "You told me about it, daddy." He began to sing, but his voice thickened as he missed the tones once associated with it. And Lady Merrifield, too, nearly broke down as with all her heart she sang, hopefully,

"Now, Lord, the gracious work begin."

CHAPTER VI.

THE STONE MELTING.

IT was with a strange feeling that Dolores woke on the New Year's morning, that something was very sad and strange, and yet that there was a sense of relief. For one thing, that terrible confession to her father was written, and was no longer a weight hanging over her. And though his answer was still to come, that was months away. There was Uncle Regie greatly displeased with her; there was Constance treating her as a traitor; there was the mischief done, and yet something hard and heavy was gone? Something sweet and precious had come in on her! Surely it was, that now she knew and felt that she could trust in Aunt Lilias—yes, and in Mysie. She got up, quite looking forward to meeting those gentle, brown eyes of her aunt's, that she seemed never before to have looked into, and to feeling the sweet, motherly kiss which had so much more meaning in it now, as almost to make up for Uncle Reginald's estrangement.

She even anticipated gladly those ten minutes

alone with her aunt, which she used to dislike so much, hoping that the holiday-time would not hinder them. Really wishing to please her aunt, she had learnt her portion perfectly, and Lady Merrifield showed that she appreciated the effort, though still it was more a lesson than a reality.

"My dear!" she said, "I am afraid this is another blow for you—it came this morning."

It was the account from Professor Mühlwasser's German publisher, amounting to a few shillings more than six pounds. And an announcement that the books were on the way.

"Oh," cried Dolores, "I thought he was dead! He told me so! Uncle Alfred, I mean! And it was only to get the money! How could he be so wicked?"

"I am afraid that was all he cared for."

"And what shall I do, Aunt Lily? Will you pay it, please, and take all my allowance till it is made up?"

"I think it will be more comfortable for you if I do something of that sort, though I don't think you should go entirely without money. You have a pound a quarter. I was going to give you yours at once."

"Oh, take it—*pray*—"

"Suppose I give you five shillings, instead of twenty. I do not think it well to leave you with nothing for a year and a half, and this is nearly what Mysie has."

"A shilling a month—Very well. I wish I could pay it all at once!"

"No doubt you do, my dear, but this will keep you

in mind for a long time what a dangerous thing you did in giving away money you had no right to dispose of."

"Yes," said Dolores. "Mother earned money for him. I know she never took father's without asking him; but I couldn't earn, and couldn't ask."

Lady Merrifield kissed her, for very joy, to hear no sullenness in her tone; and then all went to church together on the New Year's day that was to be the beginning of better things. Lord Rotherwood had just time to go before meeting the train which was to take him to High Court, leaving his Fly too much used to his absences to be distressed about them, and, in fact, somewhat crazy about a notion which Gillian had started that morning, of getting up a little play to surprise him when he came back for Twelfth Day, as he promised to do.

Mamma declared that if it was in French, and the words were learnt every morning before half-past eleven, it should supersede all other lessons; but such was the hatred of the whole boy faction to French, that they declared they had rather do rational sensible lessons twice over than learn such rot, and this carried the day. The drama proposed was that one in an old number of "Aunt Judy," where the village mayor is persuaded by the drummer to fine the girls for wearing lace caps. The French original existed in the house, and Fly started the idea that the male performers should speak English and the female French; but this was laughed down.

In the midst Uncle Reginald came to the door and called, "Lilias, can you speak to me a minute?"

Lady Merrifield went out into the hall to him.

"Here's a policeman come over, Lily. They have got the fellow!"

"Flinders?"

"Yes; arrested him on board a steamer at Bristol."

"Oh, I wish they had let it alone!"

"So do I. They are bringing him back. The Darminster City bench sits to-day, and they want that unlucky child over there to make her deposition for his committal."

"Can't they commit him without her?"

"Not for the forgery. The bank people are bent on prosecuting for that, and we can't stop them. I suppose she can be depended on?"

"Reginald, don't! I told you the deceit was an unnatural growth from Constance's pseudo sentiment."

"Well, get her ready to come with me," said the colonel, with a gesture of doubt; "we must catch the 12.50. The superintendent brought a fly."

"You will frighten her out of her senses. I can't let her go alone with you in this mood."

"As you please, if you choose to knock yourself up. I'll tell the superintendent, and walk on to the station. You've not a moment to lose, so don't let her stand dawdling and crying."

It was a hard task for Lady Merrifield. She called Dolores, whom Mysie was inviting to be one of the village maidens, and bade her put on her things

quickly. She ordered cold meat and wine into the dining-room, called Gillian into her room, and explained while dressing, and bade her keep the others away. Then, meeting Dolores on the stairs, took her into the dining-room and made her swallow some cold beef, and drink some sherry, before telling her that the magistrates at Darminster wanted to ask her some questions. Dolores looked pale and frightened, and exclaimed,

"Oh, but he has got away!"

"My dear, I am grieved to say that he has not."

Dolores understood, and submitted more quietly and resignedly than her aunt had feared. She was a barrister's daughter, and once or twice her father had taken her and her mother part of the way on circuit with him, and she had been in court, so that she had known from the first that if her uncle were arrested there was no choice but that she must speak out. So she only trembled very much and said—

"Aunt Lily, are you going with me?"

"Indeed I am, my poor child. Uncle Regie is gone on."

No more was spoken then, but Dolores put her cold hand into her aunt's muff.

Gillian kept all the flock prisoned in the schoolroom. Wilfred, Val, and Fergus rushed to the window, and were greatly disappointed not to see a policeman on the box, "taking Dolores to be tried"—as Fergus declared, and Wilfred insisted, just because Gillian and Mysie contradicted it with all their might. He

continued to repeat it with variations and exaggerations, until Jasper heard him, and declared that he should have a thorough good licking if he said so again, administering a cuff by way of earnest. Wilfred howled, and was ordered not to be such an ape, and Fly looked on in wonder at the domestic discipline.

The superintendent had, in fact, walked on with Uncle Reginald, and Dolores saw nothing of him, but was put into an empty first-class carriage, into which her aunt followed her, but her uncle, observing, "You know how to manage her, Lily," betook himself to a smoking-carriage, and left them to themselves.

Dolores was never a very talking girl, and the habit of silence had grown upon her. She leant against her aunt and she put her arm round her, and did not attempt to say anything till she asked,

"Will he be there?"

"I don't know, I am afraid he will. It is very sad for you, my poor Dolly; but we must recollect that, after all, it may be much better for him to be stopped now than to go on and get worse and worse in some strange country."

Dolores did not ask what she was to do, she knew enough already about trials to understand that she was only to answer questions, and she presently said,

"This can't be his trial. There are no assizes now."

"No, this is only for the committal. It will very soon be over, if you will only answer quietly and steadily. If you do so, I think Uncle Regie will

be pleased, and tell your father! I am sure I shall!"

Dolores pressed up closer and laid her cheek against the soft sealskin. In the midst of her trouble there was a strange wonder in her. Could this be really the aunt whom she had thought so cruel, unjust, and tyrannical, and from whom she had so carefully hidden her feelings? Nobody got into the carriage, and just before reaching Darminster, Lady Merrifield made a great effort over her own shyness, and said,

"Now, Dolly, we will pray a little prayer that you may be a faithful witness, and that God may turn it all to good for your poor uncle."

Dolores was very much surprised, and did not know whether she liked it or not, but she saw her aunt's closed eyes and uplifted hands, and she tried to follow the example.

The train stopped, and her uncle came to the door, looking inquiringly at her.

"She will be good and brave," said her aunt; and quickly passing across the platform, Dolores found herself beside her aunt, with her uncle opposite in another fly.

Things had been arranged for them considerately, and after they came to the Guildhall, where the city magistrates were sitting, Colonel Mohun went at once into court; the others were taken to a little room, and waited there a few minutes before Colonel Mohun came to call for his niece. It was a long room, with

a rail at one end, and Dolores knew, with a strange thrill which made her shudder, that Mr. Flinders was there, but she could not bear to look at him, and only squeezed hard at the hand of her aunt, who asked, in a somewhat shaky voice, if she might come with her niece.

"Certainly, certainly, Lady Merrifield," said one of the magistrates, and chairs were set both for her and Colonel Mohun.

"You are Miss Mohun, I think—may I ask your Christian name in full?" And then she had to spell it, and likewise tell her exact age, after which she was put on oath—as she knew enough of trials to expect.

"Are you residing with Lady Merrifield?"

"Yes."

"But your father is living?"

"Yes, but he is in the Fiji Islands."

"Will you favour us with his exact name?"

"Maurice Devereux Mohun."

"When did he leave England?"

"The fifth of last September."

"Did he leave any money with you?"

"Yes."

"In what form?"

"A cheque on W——'s Bank.

"To bearer or order?"

"To order."

"What was the date?"

"I think it was the 31st of August, but I am not sure."

"For how much?"

"For seven pounds."

"When did you part with it?"

"On the Friday before Christmas Day."

"Did you do anything to it first?"

"I wrote my name on the back."

"What did you do with it."

"I sent it to—" her voice became a little hoarse, but she brought out the words—"to Mr. Flinders."

"Is this the same?"

"Yes—only some one has put 'ty' to the 'seven' in writing, and 0 to the figure 7."

"Can you swear to the rest as your father's writing and your own?"

The evidence of the banker's clerk as to the cashing of the cheque had been already taken, and the magistrate said, "Thank you, Miss Mohun, I think the case is complete, and we need not trouble you any more."

But the prisoner's voice made Dolores start and shudder again, as he said,

"I beg your pardon, sir, but you have not asked the young lady'—there was a sort of sneer in his voice—'how she sent this draft."

"Did not you send it direct by the post?" demanded the magistrate.

"No; I gave it to——" Again she paused, and the words "Gave it to——?" were authoritatively repeated, so that she had no choice.

"I gave it to Miss Constance Hacket to send."

"You will observe, sir," said Flinders, in a somewhat insolent tone, "that the evidence which the witness has been so ready to adduce is incomplete. There is another link between her hands and mine."

"You may reserve that point for your defence on your trial," rejoined the magistrate. "There is quite sufficient evidence for your committal."

There was already a movement to let Dolores be taken away by her uncle and aunt, so as to spare her from any reproach or impertinence that Flinders might launch at her. She was like some one moving in a dream, glad that her aunt should hold her hand as if she were a little child, saying, as they came out into the street, "Very clearly and steadily done, Dolly! Wasn't it, Uncle Regie?"

"Yes," he said, absently. "We must look out, or we shan't catch the 4.30 train."

He almost threw them into a cab, and made the driver go his quickest, so that, after all, they had full ten minutes to spare. It made Dolores sick at heart to go near the waiting and refreshment-rooms where she and Constance had spent all that time with Flinders; but she could not bear to say so before her uncle, and he was bent on getting some food for Lady Merrifield.

"Not soup, Regie; there might not be time to swallow it. A glass of milk for us each, please; we can drink that at once, and anything solid that we can take with us. I am sure your mouth must be dry, my dear."

Very dry it was, and Dolores gladly swallowed the milk, and found, when seated in the train, that she was really hungry enough to eat her full share of the sandwiches and buns which the colonel had brought in with him; and then she sat resting against her aunt, closed her eyes, and half dozed in the rattle of the train, not moving in the pause at the stations, but quite conscious that Colonel Mohun said, "Not a spark of feeling for anybody, not even for that man! As hard as a stone!"

"For shame, Regie!" said her aunt. "How angry you would have been if she had made a scene."

"I should have liked her better."

"No, you wouldn't, when you come to understand. There's stuff in her, and depth too."

"Aye, she's deep enough."

"Poor child!" said Lady Merrifield, tenderly. And then the train went on, and the noise drowned the voices, so that Dolores only partly heard, "You will see how she will rise," and the answer, "You may be right; I hope so. But I can't get over deliberate deceit."

He settled himself in his corner, and Lady Merrifield durst not move nor raise her voice lest she should break what seemed such deep slumber, but which really was half torpor, half a dull dismay, holding fast eyes, lips, and limbs, and which really became sleep, so that Dolores did not hear the next bit of conversation during the ensuing halt.

"I say, Lily, I did not like the fellow's last question. He means to give trouble about it."

"I was sorry the other name was brought in, but it must have come sooner or later."

"That's true; but if she can't swear to the figures on the draft, ten to one that the fellow will get off."

"You don't doubt——"

"No, no; but there's the chance for the defence, and he was sharp enough to see it."

"There is nothing to be said or done about it, of course."

"Of course not. There's nothing for it but to let it alone."

They went on again, and when the train reached Silverton, Dolly was dreaming that her father had come, and that he said Uncle Alfred should be hanged unless she found the money for Professor Mühlwasser. She even looked about for him, and said, "Where's father?" when she was wakened to get out.

Gillian came up to her mother's room to hear what had happened, and to give an account of the day, which had gone off prosperously by Harry's help. He had kept excellent order at dinner, and "there's something about Fly which makes even Wilfred be mannerly before her." And then they had gone out and had made Fly free of the Thorn Fortress.

"My dear, that must have been terribly damp and cold at this time of year."

"I thought of that, mamma, and so we didn't sit down, and made it a guerilla war; only Fergus

couldn't understand the difference between guerillas and gorillas, and would thump upon himself and roar when they were in ambush."

"Rather awkward for the ambush!"

"Yes, Wilfred said he was a traitor, and tied him to a tree, and then Fly found him crying, and would have let him out; but she couldn't get the knots undone; and what do you think? She made Wilfred cut the string himself with his own knife! I never knew such a girl for making every one do as she pleases. Then, when it got dark, we came in, and had a sort of a kind of a rehearsal, only that nobody knew any of the parts, or what each was to be."

"A sort of a kind, indeed, it must have been!"

"But we think the play will be lovely! You can't think how nice Fly was. You know we settled for her to be Annette, the dear, funny, naughty girl, but as soon as she saw that Val wanted the part, she said she didn't care, and gave it up directly, and I don't think we ought to let her, and Hal thinks so too; and all the boys are very angry, and say Val will make a horrid mess of it. Then Mysie wanted to give up the good girl to Fly, and only be one of the chorus, but Fly says she had rather be one of the chorus ones herself than that. So we settled that you should fix the parts, and we would abide by your choice."

"I hope there was no quarrelling."

"N—no; only a little falling upon Val by the boys, and Fly put a stop to that. Oh, mamma, if it were

only possible to turn Dolly into Fly! I can't help saying it, we seemed to get on so much better just because we hadn't poor Dolly to make a deadweight, and tempt the boys to be tiresome: while Fly made everything go off well. I can't describe it, she didn't in the least mean to keep order or interfere, but somehow squabbles seem to die away before her, and nobody wants to be troublesome."

"Dear little thing! It is a very sweet disposition. But, Gill, I do believe that we shall see poor Dolly take a turn now!"

"Well! having quarrelled with that Constance is in her favour!"

"Try and think kindly of her trouble, Gill, and then it will be easier to *be* kind to her."

Gillian sighed. Falsehood and determined opposition to her mother were the greatest possible crimes in her eyes; and at her age it was not easy to separate the sin from the sinner.

New Year's night was always held to be one of especial merriment, but Lady Merrifield was so much tired out by her expedition that she hardly felt equal to presiding over any sports, and proposed that instead the young folk should dance. Gillian and Hal took turns to play for them, and Uncle Reginald and Fly were in equal request as partners. It was Mysie who came to draw Dolores out of her corner, and begged her to be her partner—"If you wouldn't very much rather not," she said, in a pleading, wistful, voice.

Dolores would "very much rather not;" but she saw that Mysie would be left out altogether if she did not consent, as Hal was playing and Uncle Regie was dancing with Primrose. She thought of resolutions to turn over a new leaf, and not to refuse everything, so she said, "Yes, this once," and it was wonderful how much freshened she felt by the gay motion, and perhaps by Mysie's merry, good-natured eyes and caressing hand. After that she had another turn with Gillian and one with Hal, and even one with Fergus, because, as he politely informed her, no one else would have him for a quadrille. But, just as this was in progress, and she could not help laughing at his ridiculous mistakes and contempt of rules, she met Uncle Reginald's eye fixed on her in wonder. "He thinks I don't care," thought she to herself. All her pleasure was gone, and she moved so dejectedly, that her aunt, watching from the sofa, called her and told her she was over-tired, and sent her to bed.

Dolores was tired, but not in the way which made it harder instead of easier to sleep, or, rather, she slept just enough to relax her full consciousness and hold over herself, and bring on her a misery of terror and loneliness, and feeling of being forsaken by the whole world. And when she woke fully enough to understand the reality, it was no better; she felt, then, the position she had put herself into, and almost saw in the dark, Flinders's malicious vindictive glance, Constance's anger, Uncle Regie's cold, severe look, and, worse than all, her father reading her letter.

She fell again into an agony of sobbing, not without a little hope that Aunt Lily would be again brought to her side. At last the door was softly pushed open in the dark, but it was not Aunt Lily, it was Mysie's little bare feet that patted up to the bed, her arms that embraced, her cheek that was squeezed against the tearful one—"Oh, Dolly, Dolly! please don't cry so sadly!"

"Oh! it is so dreadful, Mysie!"

"Are you ill—like the other night?"

"No—but—Mysie—I can't bear it!"

"I don't want to call mamma," said Mysie, thoughtfully, "for she is so much tired, and Uncle Regie and Gill said she would be quite knocked up, and got her to come up to bed when we went. Dolly, would it be better if I got into your bed and cuddled you up?"

"Oh yes! oh yes! please do, there's a dear good Mysie."

There was not much room, but that mattered the less, and the hugging of the warm arms seemed to heal the terrible sense of being unloved and forsaken, the presence to drive away the visions of angry faces that had haunted her; but there was the longing for fellow-feeling on her, and she said, "That's nice! Oh, Mysie! you can't think what it is like! Uncle Regie said I didn't care, and he could never forgive deliberate deceit—and I was so fond of Uncle Regie!"

"Oh! but he will, if you never tell a story again," said Mysie—and, as she felt a gesture implying despair—"Yes, they do; I told a story once."

"You, Mysie! I thought you never did?"

"Yes, once, when we were crossing to Ireland, and nurse wouldn't let Wilfred tie our handkerchiefs together and fish over the side, and he was very angry, and threw her parasol into the sea when she wasn't looking; and I knew she would be so cross, that when she asked me if I knew what was become of it, I said 'No,' and thought I didn't, really. But then it came over me, again and again, that I had told a story, and, oh! I was so miserable whenever I thought of it—at church, and saying my prayers, you know; and mamma was poorly, and couldn't come to us at night for ever so long, but at last I could bear it no longer, I heard her say, "Mysie is always truthful," and then I did get it out, and told her. And, oh! she and papa were so kind, and they did quite and entirely forgive me!"

"Yes, you told of your own accord; and they were your own—not Uncle Regie. Ah! Mysie, everbody hates me. I saw them all looking at me."

"No, no! Don't say such things, Dolly. None of us do anything so shocking."

"Yes, Jasper does, and Wilfred and Val!"

"No! no! no! they don't hate; only they are tiresome sometimes; but if you wouldn't be cross, they would be nice directly—at least Japs and Val. And 'tisn't hating with Willie, only he thinks teasing is fun."

"And you and Gillian. You can only just bear me."

"No! no! no!" with a great hug, "that's not true."

"You like Fly ever so much better!"

"She is so dear, and so funny," said Mysie, the truthful, "but somehow, Dolly dear, do you know, I think if you and I got to love one another like real friends, it would be nicer still than even Fly—because you are here like one of us, you know; and besides, it would be more, because you are harder to get at. Will you be my own friend, Dolly?"

"Oh, Mysie, I must!" and there was a fresh kissing and hugging.

"And there's mamma," added Mysie.

"Yes, I know Aunt Lily does now; but, oh! if you had seen Uncle Alfred's face, and heard Uncle Regie," and Dolly began to sob again as they returned on her. "I see them whenever I shut my eyes!"

"Darling," whispered Mysie, "when I feel bad at night, I always kneel up in bed and say my prayers again!"

"Do you ever feel bad?"

"Oh yes, when I'm frightened, or if I've been naughty, and haven't told mamma. Shall we do it, Dolly?"

"I don't know what that has to do with it, but we'll try."

"Mamma told me something to say out of."

The two little girls rose up, with clasped hands in their bed, and Mysie whispered very low, but so that her companion heard, and said with her a few childish

words of confession, pleading and entreating for strength, and then the Lord's Prayer, and the sweet old verse:—

"I lay my body down to sleep,
I give my soul to Christ to keep,
Wake I at morn, as wake I never,
I give my soul to Christ for ever."

"Ah! but I am afraid of that. I don't like it," said Dolores, as they lay down again.

"It won't make one never wake," returned Mysie; "and I do like to give my soul to Christ. It seems so to rest one, and make one not afraid."

"I don't know," said Dolores; "and why did you say the Lord's Prayer? That hasn't anything to do with it!"

"Oh, Dolly, when He is our Father near, though our own dear fathers are far away, and there's deliver us from evil—all that hurts us, you know—and forgive us. It's all there."

"I never thought that," said Dolores. "I think you have some different prayers from mine. Old nurse taught me long ago. I wish you would always say yours with me. You make them nicer."

Mysie answered with a hug, and a murmured "If I can," and offered to say the 121st Psalm, her other step to comfort, and, as she said it, she resolved in her mind whether she could grant Dolores's request; for she was not sure whether she should be allowed to leave her room before saying her own, and she knew enough of Dolores by this time to be aware that

to say she would ask mamma's leave would put an end to all. "I know," was her final decision; "I'll say my own first, and then come to Dolly's room."

But by that time Dolores was asleep, even if Mysie had not been too sleepy to speak.

She meant to have rushed to the room she shared with Valetta before it was time to get up, but Lois found the black head and the brown together on Dolores's pillow, wrapped in slumber; and though Mysie flew home as soon as she was well awake, Mrs. Halfpenny descended on her while she was yet in her bath, and inflicted a sharp scolding for the malpractice of getting into her cousin's bed.

"But Dolly was so miserable, nurse, and mamma was too tired to call."

"Then you should have called me, Miss Mysie, and I'd have sorted her well! You kenned well 'tis a thing not to be done, and at your age; ye should have minded your duties better."

And nurse even intercepted Mysie on her way to Dolores's room, and declared she would have no messing and gossiping in one another's rooms. Miss Mysie was getting spoilt among strangers.

Mysie went down with a strong sense of having been disobedient, as well as of grief for Dolores's disappointment. Happily mamma was late that morning, and nobody was in her room but Primrose. Poor Mysie had soon, with tears in her eyes, confessed her transgression. Her mother's tears, to her great surprise, were on her cheek together with a kiss. "Dear

child, I am not displeased. Indeed, I am not; I will tell nurse. It must not be a habit, but this was an exception, and I am only thankful you could comfort her."

"And, mamma, may I go now to her. She said I could help her to say her prayers, and I think she only has little baby ones that her nurse taught her, and she doesn't *see into* the Lord's Prayer."

"My dear, my dear, if you can help her to pray, you will do the thing most sure to be a blessing to her of all."

And when Mysie was gone, Lady Merrifield knelt down afresh in thankfulness.

CHAPTER VII.

MYSIE AND DOLORES.

THINGS were going on more quietly at Silverton. That is to say, there were no outward agitations, for the house was anything but quiet. Lady Merrifield had no great love for children's parties, where, as she said, they sat up too late, to eat and drink what was not good for them, and to get presents that they did not care about; and though at Dublin it had been necessary on her husband's account to give and take such civilities, she had kept out of the exchange at Silverton. But, on the other hand, there were festivals, and she promoted a full amount of special treats at home among themselves, or with only an outsider or two, and she endured any amount of noise, provided it was not quarrelsome, over-boisterous, or at unfit times.

There was the school tea, and magic-lantern, when Mr. Pollock acted as exhibitor, and Harry as spokesman, and worked them up gradually from grave and beautiful scenes like the cedars of Lebanon, the Parthenon and Colosseum, with full explanations, through

dissolving views of cottage and bridge by day and night, summer and winter, of life-boat rescue, and the siege of Sevastopol, with shells flying, on to Jack and the Beanstalk and the New Tale of a Tub, the sea-serpent, and the nose-grinding! Lady Phyllis's ecstacy was surpassing, more especially as she found her beloved little maid-of-all-work, and was introduced to all that small person's younger brothers and sisters.

Here they met Miss Hacket, who was in charge of a class. She comported herself just as usual, and Gillian's dignity and displeasure gave way before her homely cordiality. Constance had not come, as indeed nothing but childhood, sympathy with responsibility for childhood, could make the darkness, stuffiness, and noise of the exhibition tolerable. Even Lady Merrifield trusted her flock to its two elders, and enjoyed a *tête-à-tête* evening with her brother, who profited by it to advise her strongly to send Dolores to their sister Jane before harm was done to her own children.

"I would not see that little Mysie of yours spoilt for all the world," said he.

"Nor I; but I don't think it likely to happen."

"Do you know that they are always after each other, chattering in their bedrooms at night. I hear them through the floor."

"Only one night—Mysie told me all about it—I believe Mysie will do more for that poor child than any of us."

Uncle Regie shrugged his shoulders a little.

"Yes, I know I was wrong before, when I wouldn't take Jane's warning; but that was not about one of my own, and, besides, poor Dolores is very much altered."

"I'll tell you what, Lily, when any one, I don't care who, man, or woman, or child, once is given up to that sort of humbug and deceit, carrying it on as that girl, Dolores, had done, I would never trust again an inch beyond what I could see. It eats into the very marrow of the bones—everything is acting afterwards."

"That would be saying no repentance was possible —that Jacob never could become Israel."

"I only say I have never seen it."

"Then I hope you will, nay, that you do. I believe your displeasure is the climax of all Dolly's troubles."

But Colonel Reginald Mohun could not forgive the having been so entirely deceived where he had so fully trusted; and there was no shaking his opinion that Dolores was essentially deceitful and devoid of feeling, and that the few demonstrations of emotion that were brought before him were only put on to excite the compassion of her weakly, good-natured aunt, so he only answered, "You always were a soft one, Lily."

To which she only answered, "We shall see," knowing that in his present state of mind he would only set down the hopeful tokens that she perceived either to hypocrisy on the girl's side, or weakness on hers.

Dolores had indeed gone with the others rather because she could not bear remaining to see her

uncle's altered looks than because she expected much pleasure. And she had the satisfaction of sitting by Mysie, and holding her hand, which had become a very great comfort in her forlorn state—so great that she forebore to hurt her cousin's feelings by discoursing of the dissolving views she had seen at a London party. Also she exacted a promise that this station should always be hers.

Mysie, on her side, was in some of the difficulties of a popular character, for Fly felt herself deserted, and attacked her on the first opportunity.

"What does make you always go after Dolly instead of me, Mysie? Do you like her so much better?"

"Oh no! but you have them all, and she has nobody."

"Well, but she has been so horridly naughty, hasn't she?"

"I don't think she meant it."

"One never does. At least, I'm sure I don't—and mamma always says it is nonsense to say that."

"I'm not sure whether it is always," said Mysie, thoughtfully, "for sometimes one does worse than one knows. Once I made a mouse-trap of a beautiful large sheet of bluey paper, and it turned out to be an order come down to papa. Mamma and Alethea gummed it up as well as ever they could again, but all the officers had to know what had happened to it."

"And were you punished?"

"I was not allowed to go into papa's room without one of the elder ones till after my next birthday, but

that wasn't so bad as papa's being so vexed, and everybody knowing it; and Major Denny would talk about mice and mouse-traps every time he saw me till I quite hated my name."

"And I'm sure you didn't mean to cut up an important paper."

"No; but I did do a little wrong, for we had no leave to take anything not quite *in* the waste basket, and this had been blown off the table, and was on the floor outside. They didn't punish me so much I think because of *that*. Papa said it was partly his own fault for not securing it when he was called off. You see little wrongs that one knows turn out great wrongs that one would never think of, and that is so very dreadful, and makes me so very sorry for Dolores."

"I didn't think you would like a cross, naughty girl like that more than your own Fly."

"No, no! Fly, don't say that. I don't really like her half so well, you know, only if you would help me to be kind to her."

"I am sure my mother wouldn't wish me to have anything to do with her. I don't think she would have let me come here if she had known what sort of girl she is."

"But your papa knew when he left you——"

"Oh, papa! yes; but he can never see anything amiss in a Mohun; I heard her say so. And he wants me to be friends with you; dear, darling friends like him and your Uncle Claude, Mysie, so you must be, and not be always after *that* Dolores."

"I want to be friends with both. One can have two friends."

"No! no! no! not two *best* friends. And you are my best friend, Mysie, ever so much better than Alberta Fitzhugh, if only you'll come always to me this little time when I'm here, and sit by me instead of *that* Dolly."

"I do love you very much, Fly."

"And you'll sit by me at the penny reading to-night?"

"I promised Dolly. But she may sit on the other side."

"No," said Phyllis, with jealous perverseness. "I don't care if *that* Dolly is to be on the other side, you'll talk to nobody but her! Now, Mysie, I had been writing to ask daddy to let you come home with me, you yourself, to the Butterfly's Ball, but if you won't sit by me, you may stay with your dear Dolores."

"Oh, Fly! When you know I promised, and there is the other side."

But Fly had been courted enough by all the cousinhood to have become exacting and displeased at having any rival to the honour of her hand—so she pouted and said, "I don't care about it, if you have her. I shall sit between Val and Jasper."

One must be thirteen, with a dash of the sentiment of a budding friendship, to enter into all that "sitting by" involves; and in Mysie's case, here was her compassionate promise standing not only between her and the avowed preference of one so charming as

Fly, but possibly depriving her of the chances of the wonders of the Butterfly's Ball. No wonder that disconsolate tears came into her eyes as she uttered another pleading, "Oh, Fly, how can you?"

"You must choose," said the offended young lady; "you can't have us both."

To which argument she stuck, being offended as well as scandalized at being set aside for such a culprit as Dolores, whose misdemeanours and discourtesy were equally shocking to her imagination.

Mysie could confide her troubles to no one, for she was aware that caring about sitting together was treated by the elders as egregious folly; but a promise was a promise with her, and she held staunchly to her purpose, though between Dolores and Miss Vincent she lost all those delightful asides which enhanced the charms of the amusing parts of the penny reading and beguiled the duller ones—of which there were many, since it was more concert than penny reading, people being rather shy of committing themselves to reading—Hal, Mr. Pollock and the schoolmaster being the only volunteers in that line.

Gillian had, sorely against the grain, to play a duet with Constance Hacket. The two young ladies had met one another with freezing civility in the classroom, and to those who understood matters, the stiffness of their necks and shoulders, as they sat at the piano, spoke unutterable things. But there had never been any real liking between Constance and the younger Merrifields, and the mother did not

trouble herself much about this, knowing that the vexation of the elder sister, about whom she did care, would pass off with friendly intercourse.

Fly's displeasure did not last long, for Mysie had more attractions for her than any one else, and she was a good-humoured creature. There was a joyous Twelfth-Night, with home-made cake and home-characters, prepared by mamma and Gillian, and followed up by games, in which Dolores had a share, promoted by her aunt, who was very anxious to keep her from feeling set apart from every one; but this was difficult to manage, as she was so generally disliked, that even Gillian was only good-natured to her in accordance with her mother's desire that she should not be treated as "out of the pale of humanity." Mysie alone sought her out and brought her forward with any real earnestness, and good little Mysie had a somewhat difficult part to play between kindness to her and Fly's occasional little jealous tiffs and decided disapproval. Mysie never thought, however, about the situation or its difficulties, she simply followed the moment's call of kindness to Dolores, and, when it was possible, followed her own inclinations, and enjoyed Fly's lively society.

And Dolores was certainly softening and improving. A word to Mrs. Halfpenny had secured the two girls being permitted to say their prayers together in Dolores's room unmolested; and what was a reality to a contemporary became less and less to Dolores a mere lesson imposed by the authority of an elder.

That link between religious instruction and daily life, which is all important, yet so difficult to find, was being gradually put into Dolores's hands by her little cousin-friend. Lady Merrifield hoped and guessed it might be thus, from the questions that Mysie asked her at times, and from the quickened attention Dolores showed to her religious lessons, and her less dull and indifferent air at church.

It could not be said that she was different with the others. She was depressed, and wanted spirits for enjoyment, nor would active romping diversions ever be pleasant to her. She had not the nature for them, and was not young enough to learn to like them. It could not but seem foolish to her to race about as a Croat or a savage, and she only beheld with wonder Gillian's genuine delight in games not merely entered into for the sake of the little ones. But there was a strong devotion growing up in her to her aunt and to Mysie, and what they asked of her she did—even when on a wet day her aunt condemned her to learn battledore and shuttlecock of Gillian, who was equally to be pitied for the awkwardness of her pupil and the banter of her brothers, while Dolly picked up her shuttlecock and tossed it off with grim determination, as if doing penance for this dismal half hour. She managed better in the games where ready sharpness of intellect or memory was wanted, and she liked these, and would have liked them still better if Uncle Reginald had not always looked astonished if she laughed.

She did her part, too, in the little play, being one of the chorus of the maidens who "make a vow to make a row." Lady Merrifield had, according to the general request, saved disputes by casting the parts, Gillian being the sage old woman who brought the damsels to reason, Fly, the prime mover of the tumult, and Mysie, her *confidante*, while Val and Dolly made up the mob. A little manipulation of skirts, tennis-aprons, ribbons, and caps made very nice peasant costumes. Hal was the self-important Bailli, and Jasper the drummer, the part of *gens-d'armes* being all that Wilfred and Fergus could be trusted with.

Lord Rotherwood came back, and his little daughter's ecstacy was goodly to see, as she danced about her daddy, almost bursting with the secret of what he was to see after dinner, and showing herself so brilliantly well and happy that he congratulated himself upon her mother's satisfaction.

While the elders were at dinner, Gillian, with Miss Vincent's help, finished off the arrangements. There were no outsiders, except the Vicar and Mr. Pollock, who had been asked to dinner, for Lady Merrifield said she never liked to make her children an exhibition.

"You are an old-fashioned Lily," said her cousin, "and happily not concerned with popularity. It is a fine thing to be able to consult one's children's absolute best."

The performance went off beautifully—at least so

thought both actors and spectators. The dignity of the Bailli and the meddling of the drummer were alike delightful; Fly was charmingly arch and mutinous; Mysie very straightforward; and the least successful personation was that of Gillian, who had a fit of stage-fright, forgot sentences, and whirred her spinning-wheel nervously, all the worse for being scolded by her brothers behind the scenes, and assured that she was making a mull of the whole affair. And she had been so spirited at the rehearsals, but she was at a self-conscious age, and could not forget the four spectators. Very little was required of Dolores, but that little she did simply and well, and Lord Rotherwood, after watching her all the evening, observed to Lady Merrifield, "I should say your difficulties were diminishing, are they not? The thunder-cloud seems to be a little lightened."

"I am so glad you think so, Rotherwood. I feel sure that all this distress has drawn her nearer to us, only Regie won't believe it."

"Regie is prejudiced."

"Is he? I thought him specially fond of Maurice's child, and that this was revulsion of feeling; but what I am afraid of is, that he will never believe in her or like her again, whatever she may be, and she is really fond of him."

"Yes, Reginald is not over disposed to believe in any woman's truth—outside his own family and sisters. Poor fellow! I can't say he was well used."

"What? I suppose he has had his romance like

other people—his little episode, as my husband calls it."

"Yes; and I am afraid we were accountable for it. You remember we were at Harthope Castle for the first two years after I was married, while Rotherwood was brought up to the requirements of the Victorian age. The —th was quartered at Harfield, within easy distance, and a splendid looking fellow like Regie was invaluable to Victoria, whenever she wanted anything to go off well. Well, in those days I had a ward, my mother's great niece, Maude Conway. A pretty, winsome creature it was, and an heiress in a moderate sort of way, and poor old Redge, after all his little affairs, and he had had his share of them, was evidently in for it at last. Victoria thought, as well as myself, it was the best thing for them both. He was the sound-hearted, good fellow to keep her matters straight, and she had enough for comfort without overweighting the balance. So they were engaged, but unluckily they had to wait till she was of age, about eight months off, and they were both ridiculously shy, and would not have the thing known, though Victoria said it was unwise. I don't think even Jane suspected it."

"No; I don't think she could have done so."

"Well, there was the season, and Victoria was not in condition for going out, and Maude was all for staying quietly with her; but old Lady Conway came about—a regular schemer—a woman I never could abide. She had married off her own daughters, and

wanted her niece to practise on, that was the fact. Victoria says she always knew that she, Maude I mean, was very impressionable and impulsive, and so she wanted to have her out of harm's way; but one could not prevent her aunt from getting hold of her and taking her out. Then people told us of her goings on with that scamp Clanmacklosky and that sister of his. Victoria talked to her by the yard, but she denied it, and we thought it all gossip. Regie came up for a couple of nights, and she was as sweet on him as ever, and sent him away thinking it all right; but the end of it was, she fought off going down to Rotherwood with us, but went to Brighton with Lady Conway, and the next thing we heard was that she wrote to throw Reginald over, and she married Clanmacklosky a month after she was twenty-one! I don't think I ever saw Victoria so cut up, for we had really liked the girl and thought well of her. To this hour I believe it was all that woman's doing, and that poor Maude has supped sorrow. She has lost all her good looks."

"And Regie has never got over it?"

"Not so as to believe in a woman again."

"He used to be rather a joke for susceptibility, and was still a regular boy when we went out to Gibraltar. I thought him much graver."

"Exactly; since that affair his soul has gone into his regiment. It's a wife to him, and luckily he got his promotion in time, so as not to be shelved."

"I suppose it was really an escape."

"I don't know—she would have done very well in his hands. She is the sort of woman to be as you make her, and even now is a world too good for Clan. Victoria can never be quite cordial with her, but I can't see the poor harassed thing without thinking what a sweet creature she once was, and wishing I'd had the sense to look after her better. But what I came here for, Lily, was to say you must let me have that Mysie of yours, since you won't come yourself to this concern of ours. I'm afraid you won't think much good has come of us, but we couldn't do the Country Mouse much harm in a fortnight; and you know it is the wish of my heart that my lonely Fly should grow up on such terms with your flock as Florence and I did with you all."

He pleaded quite piteously, and he was backed up by a letter from his wife, very grateful for her little Phyllis's happy visit, reiterating the invitation to Lady Merrifield, and begging that if she still could not come herself, she would at least send Jasper and Mysie for the Butterfly's Ball. Mysie's fancy dress would be ready for her, only waiting for the final touches after it was tried on. Lady Florence Devereux, too, was near at hand, and wrote to promise to look after Mysie.

There was no refusing after this. Lady Florence was not far from being like a sister to her cousins. She had tended her mother's old age, and had subsequently settled down into the lady of all work of Rotherwood parish. Lady Merrifield had much

confidence in her, and indeed all she saw of Fly gave her a great respect for Lady Rotherwood's management of her child. Harry was going to his uncle's at Beechcroft for some shooting, and would bring Mysie home when Jasper went back to school.

So Gillian was called to her mother's room to be told first of the arrangement, which certainly in some aspects was rather hard on her.

"I could not help it, my dear," said Lady Merrifield, "without absolutely asking for an invitation for you."

"No, mamma; and it is Mysie who is Fly's friend, being the same age and all. It is quite right, and I understand it."

"My dear, I am so glad I can do such a thing as this. If there were small jealousies among you, I could not venture on letting you be set aside, for I know the disappointment was quite as great to you as to Mysie, when we gave it up."

"But she was better about it than I," said Gillian; "mamma, your trusting me in that way is better than a dozen balls. Besides, I know I should hate being there without you; I'm a great old thing, as Jasper says, neither fish nor fowl, you know, not come out, and not a little girl in the schoolroom, and it would be very horrid going to a grand place like that on one's own account."

"That's right, Gillyflower." 'Tis very wholesome to discover the sourness of the grapes. And as I think grandmamma is really coming, I shall want you at home, and to look after Dolores."

"That's the worst of it, mamma; I shall never get on with her as Mysie does."

"We must do our best, for I do think really the poor child is improving."

"Lessons will begin again! That's one comfort," said Gillian, rather quaintly, thinking of the length of time that Dolores would thus be off her hands.

"And now call Mysie. I must speak to her."

As for Mysie, she was in a state of rapture. She knew her bliss before her mother had communicated it, for Lord Rotherwood could not refrain from telling his daughter that consent was gained, and Fly darted headlong to embrace Mysie, dance round her and rejoice. The boys declared that Mysie at once sprang into the air like a chamois, and that her head touched the ceiling, but this is believed to be a figment of Jasper's.

It was only on the summons to her mother's room that Mysie discovered that Gillian was not going with her. It dimmed the lustre of her delight for a little while, "Oh, Gill, aren't you very sorry? You ought to have had the first turn."

"Never mind, Mysie, you are Fly's friend,"—and the two sisters' looks at one another at that moment were a real pleasure to their mother.

Mysie was of a less shy nature than Gillian, as well as at a less awkward age, so that the visiting without her mother was less formidable, and she rushed about wild with delight; but Dolores was very disconsolate.

"Every one I care for goes away and changes," she said in her melancholy little sentiment.

"But it's only for a fortnight, Dolly, I don't think I could change so fast."

"Oh yes, you will, among all those swells. You like Fly ever so much better than me."

Mysie looked grieved and puzzled, but then exclaimed, in the tone of a discovery, "There are different sorts of likings, Dolly, don't you see. I do love Fly very much, but you know you are like a sort of almost twin sister to me. I *like* her best, but I *care* about you most!"

With which curious distinction Dolores had to put up.

CHAPTER VIII.

A SADDER AND A WISER AUTHORESS.

COLONEL MOHUN took Wilfred to his school, which began its term earlier than did Jasper's, and Silverton was wonderfully quiet. The elder Mrs. Merrifield was not to come for nearly a week, so that it would have been possible for her daughter-in-law to go to the Rotherwood festivities without interfering with her visit, but this no one except Gillian and Mysie knew, and they kept the secret well.

The departure of the boys was a great relief to Dolores. Her aunt did not rank her with Valetta and Fergus, but let her consort with herself and Gillian, and this suited her much better. Even Gillian allowed that she was ever so much nicer when there was no one to tease her. It was true that Jasper certainly, and perhaps Wilfred, would not have molested her if she had not offended the latter, and offered herself as fair game; but Gillian, who had to forestall and prevent their pranks, could not feel their absence quite the privation her sisterly spirit usually did!

Valetta and Fergus were harmless without them, but they were forlorn, being so much used to having their sports led by their two seniors that they hardly knew what to do without them, and the entreaty, or rather the whine, "I want something to do," was heard unusually often. This led to Gillian's being often called off to attend to them during the course of wet days that ensued, and thus Dolores was a good deal alone with her aunt, who was superintending her knitting a pair of silk stockings to send out to her father, it was hoped in time for his next birthday.

At the first proposal, Dolores looked dull and unwilling, and at last she squeezed out, "I don't think father will ever want me to do anything for him again."

"My poor child, do you think a father does not forgive and love all the more one who is in deep sorrow for a fault?"

"I don't think my letter seemed sorry! I was not half so sorry then as I am now," then at a kind word from her aunt her eyes overflowed, and she said, "No, I wasn't; I didn't know how good you were, or how bad I was!"

And when Aunt Lily kissed her, she put her arms round the kind neck that bent down to her, and laid her head against it, as if it was quite a rest to feel that love. Her aunt encouraged her to write again to her father, and to try to express something of her grief and entreaty for forgiveness, and she was somewhat cheered after this; as though something of the load

on her mind was removed. One day she brought down all the books in her room and said, "Please, Aunt Lily, look at them, and let them be with the rest in the schoolroom, I want to be just like the others."

Lady Merrifield was much pleased with this surrender. Some of the books were really well worth having and reading, indeed, the best of them she knew, but there were eight eight or ten which she suspected of being what Mysie called silly stories, and she kept them back to look over. She had been trying in this quiet interval to get Dolly to read something besides mere childish stories for recreation; and when she saw how well worn the story books were, and how untouched the "easy history," and the books about animals and foreign countries were, she saw why so clever a girl as Dolores seemed so stupid about everything she had not learnt as a lesson, and entirely ignorant of English poetry.

Lady Merrifield read to her and Gillian in the evenings, and how they did enjoy it, and bemoaned the coming of grandmamma, to spoil their snugness and occupy "mamma." For Dolores began so to call Lady Merrifield. She had never so termed her own mother, and it seemed to her that with the words "Aunt Lily" she put away all sorts of foolish, sinister feelings.

Mrs. Merrifield was a wonderful old lady, brisk of mind and body, though of great age. She had been spending Christmas with her eldest son, the Admiral,

at Stokesley, and was going to take on her way the daughter-in-law, of whom she knew but little in comparison; and with her she brought the granddaughter, Elizabeth Merrifield, who—since her own daughter had died—generally lived with her in London, to take care of her.

"It will be all company and horrid, and nobody will be allowed to make a noise!" sighed Valetta to Fergus, as the waggonette, well shut up, drove to the door.

"There's cousin Bessie," said Fergus.

"Oh, cousin Bessie is thirty-four, and that is as bad as being as old as grandmamma!"

And they hung back while the old lady was helped out, and brought across the hall into the warm drawing-room before her fur cloak was taken off. There was a quiet little person with her, and Val whispered, "She'll be just like Aunt Jane."

But the eyes that Bessie turned on her cousins were not at all like Aunt Jane's little searching black ones. They were of a dark shade of grey, and had a wonderful softness and sweetness in them. Gillian knew her a little already, but very little, for there had always been the elder sisters at their former short meetings. Mamma lamented that there should be so few grandchildren at home to be shown, though, as she said, "the full number might have been too noisy."

Grandmamma shook her head. "I like the house full," she said, "I'm all right, but it is a pity to see the nest emptied, like Stokesley, now. Nobody left

at home but Susan and little Sally! Make the most of them while you have them about you!"

The old lady was quite delighted to find Primrose so nearly a baby, and to have one grandchild still quite as small or smaller than some of her great grandchildren whom she had never seen. Her great pleasure, however, soon proved to be in talking about her son Jasper, and hearing all his wife could tell her about his life in India; and as Lady Merrifield liked no other subject so well, they were very happy together, and quite absorbed.

Meanwhile Bessie made herself a companion to Gillian and Dolores, and though so much older, seemed to consider herself as a girl like them. Then, living for the most part in town, she could talk about London matters to Dolly, and this was a great treat, while yet she had country tastes enough to suit Gillian, and was not in the least afraid of a long walk to the fir plantations to pick up Weymouth pine cones, and the still more precious pinaster ones.

For the first time Gillian began to see Dolores as Uncle Reginald used to know her, free from that heavy mist of sullen dislike to everything and everybody. It seemed to bring them together, but, in spite of Bessie's charms, they both continually missed Mysie, out of doors and in, in schoolroom and drawing-room, and, above all, in Dolly's bedroom. She seemed to be, as Gillian told Bessie, "a sort of family cement, holding the two ends, big and little,

together;" and Bessie responded that her elder sister Susan was one of that sort.

The evenings now were quite unlike the usual ones. Dinner was late, and the two girls came down to it. Afterwards the young ones sat round the fire in the hall, where Bessie, who was a wonderful story-teller, kept Fergus and Valetta quiet and delighted, either with invented tales or histories of the feats of her own brothers and sisters, who were so much older than their Silverton first cousins as to be like an elder generation.

When the two young ones were gone to bed, the others came into the drawing-room, where mamma and grandmamma were to be found, either going over papa's letters, or else Mrs. Merrifield talking about her Stokesley grandchildren, the same whose pranks Bessie had just been telling, so that it was not easy to believe in Sam, a captain in the navy, Harry and John farming in Canada, David working as a clergyman in the Black Country, George in a government office, Anne a clergyman's wife, and mother to the great grandchildren who were always being compared to Primrose, Susan keeping her father's house, and Sarah, though as old as Alethea, still treated as the youngest—the child of the family.

The bits of conversation came to the girls as they sat over their work, and Bessie would join in, and tell interesting things, till she saw that grandmamma was ready for her nap, and then one or other gave a little music, during which Dolly's bed-time generally came.

"You can't think how grateful I am to you for helping to brighten up that poor child in a wholesome way!" said Lady Merrifield to Bessie, under cover of Gillian's performance.

"One can't help being very sorry for her," said Elizabeth, who knew what was hanging over Dolly.

"Yes, it is a terrible punishment, especially as she has a certain affection for her step-uncle, or whatever he should be called, for her mother's sake. It really was a perplexed situation."

"But why did she not consult you?"

"Do you know, I think I have found out. She held aloof from us all, and treated us—especially me—as if we were her natural enemies, and I never could guess what was the reason till the other day; she voluntarily gave me up all her books to be looked over and put into the common stock, which you saw in the schoolroom."

"You look over all the children's books?"

"Yes. While we were wandering, they did not get enough to make it a very arduous task, and now I find that they want weeding. If children read nothing but a multitude of stories rather beneath their capacity, they are likely never to exert themselves to anything beyond novel reading."

"That is quite true, I believe."

"Well, among this literature of Dolly's I found no less than four stories based on the cruelty and injustice suffered by orphans from their aunts. The wicked step-mothers are gone out, and the barbarous

aunts are come in. It is the stock subject. I really think it is cruel, considering that there are many children who have to be adopted into uncles' families, to add to their distress and terror, by raising this prejudice. Just look at this one"—taking up Dolly's favourite, "Clare; or No Home"—"it is not at all badly written, which makes it all the worse."

"Oh, Aunt Lilias," cried Bessie, whose colour had been rising all this time. "How shall I tell you? I wrote it!"

"You! I never guessed you did anything in that line."

"We don't talk about it. My father knows, and so does grandmamma, in a way; but I never bring it before her if I can help it, for she does not half like the notion. But, indeed, they aren't all as bad as that! I know now there is a great deal of silly imitation in it; but I never thought of doing harm in this way. It is a punishment for thoughtlessness," cried poor Bessie, reddening desperately, and with tears in her eyes.

"My dear, I am so sorry I said it! If I had not one of these aunts, I should think it a very effective story."

"I'm afraid that's so much the worse! Let me tell you about it, Aunt Lilias. At home, they always laughed at me for my turn for dismalities."

"I believe one always has such a turn when one is young."

"Well, when I went to live with grandmamma, it

was very different from the houseful at home, I had so much time on my hands, and I took to dreaming and writing because I could not help it, and all my stories were fearfully doleful. I did not think of publishing them for ever so long, but at last when David terribly wanted some money for his mission church, I thought I would try, and this Clare was about the best. They took it, and gave me five pounds for it, and I was so pleased and never thought of its doing harm, and now I don't know how much more mischief it may have done!"

"You only thought of piling up the agony! But don't be unhappy about it. You don't know how many aunts it may have warned."

"I'm afraid aunts are not so impressionable as nieces. And, indeed, among ourselves story-books seemed quite outside from life, we never thought of getting any ideas from them any more than from Bluebeard."

"So it has been with some of mine, while, on the other hand, Dolores seemed to Mysie an interesting story-book heroine—which indeed she is, rather too much so. But you have not stood still with Clare."

"No, I hope I have grown rather more sensible. David set me to do stories for his lads, and, as he is dreadfully critical, it was very improving."

"Did you write 'Kate's Jewel'? That is delightful. Aunt Jane gave it to Val this Christmas, and all of us have enjoyed it! We shall be quite proud of it —that is—may I tell the children?"

"Oh, aunt, you are very good to try to make me forget that miserable Clare. I wonder whether it will do any good to tell Dolores all about it. Only I can't get at all the other girls I may have hurt."

"Nay, Bessie, I think it most likely that Dolores would have been an uncomfortable damsel, even if Clare had remained in your brain. There were other causes, at any rate, here are three more persecuted nieces in her library. Besides, as you observed, everybody does not go to story-books for views of human nature, and happily, also, homeless children are commoner in books than out of them, so I don't think the damage can be very extensive."

"One such case is quite enough! Indeed, it is a great lesson to think whether what one writes can give any wrong notion."

"I believe one always does begin with imitation."

"Yes, it is extraordinary how little originality there is in the world. In the literature of my time, everybody had small hands and high foreheads, the girls wanted to do great things, and did, or did not do, little ones, and the boys all took first classes, and the fashion was to have violet eyes, so dark you could not tell their colour, and golden hair."

"Whereas now the hair is apt to be bronze, whatever that may be like."

"And all the dresses, and all the complexions, and all the lace, and all the roses, are creamy. Bessie, I hope you don't deal in creaminess!"

"I'm afraid skim milk is more like me, and that

you would say I had taken to the goody line. I never thought of the responsibility *then*, only when I wrote for David's classes."

"It is a responsibility, I suppose, in the way in which every word one speaks and every letter one writes is so. And now—here is Gillian finishing her piece. How far is it a secret, my dear."

"It need not be so *here*, Aunt Lilias. Only my people are rather old-fashioned, you know, and are inclined to think it rather shocking of me, so it ought not to go beyond the family, and especially don't let *her*," indicating her grandmother, "hear about it. She knows I do such things—it would not be honest not to tell her—but it goes against the grain, and she has never heard one word of it all."

It appeared that Bessie daily read the psalms and lessons to grandmamma, followed up by a sermon. Then, with her wonderful eyes, Mrs. Merrifield read the newspaper from end to end, which lasted her till luncheon, then came a drive in the brougham, followed by a rest in her own room, dinner, and then Bessie read her to sleep with a book of travels or biography, of the old book-club class of her youth. Her principles were against novels, and the tale she viewed as only fit for children.

Lady Merrifield could not help thinking what a dull life it must be for Bessie, a woman full of natural gifts and of great powers of enjoyment, accustomed to a country home and a large family, and she said something of the kind. "I did not like it at first,"

said Bessie, "but I have plenty of occupations now, besides all these companions that I've made for myself, or that came to me, for I think they come of themselves."

"But what time have you to yourself?"

"Grandmamma does not want me till half-past ten in the morning, except for a little visit. And she does not mind my writing letters while she is reading the paper, provided I am ready to answer anything remarkable. I am quite the family newsmonger! Then there's always from four to half-past six when I can go out if I like. There's a dear old governess of ours living not far off, and we have nice little expeditions together. And you know it is nice to be at the family headquarters in London, and have every one dropping in."

"Oh dear! how good you are to like going on like that," said Gillian, who had come up while this was passing; "I should eat my heart out; you must be made up of contentment."

Elizabeth held up her hand in warning lest her grandmother should be wakened, but she laughed and said, "My brothers would tell you I used to be Pipy Bet. But that dear old governess, Miss Fosbrook, was the making of me, and taught me how to be jolly like Mark Tapley among the rattlesnakes," she finished, looking drolly up to Gillian.

"And, Gill, you don't know what Bessie has made her companions instead of the rattlesnakes," said Lady Merrifield. "What do you think of 'Kate's Jewel?'"

Gillian's astonishment and rapture actually woke grandmamma; not that she made much noise, but there was a disturbing force about her excitement; and the subject had to be abandoned.

As the great secret might be shared with Dolores, though not with the younger ones, whose discretion could not be depended upon, Gillian could enter upon it the more freely, though she was rather disappointed that an author was not such an extraordinary sight to Dolly as to herself. But it was charming to both that Bessie let them look at the proofs of the story she was publishing in a magazine; and allowed them as well as mamma, to read the manuscript of the tale, romance, or novel, whichever it was to be called, on which she wished for her aunt's opinion.

Bessie took care, when complying with the girls' entreaty, that she would tell them all she had written, to observe that, she thought "Clare" a very foolish book indeed, and that she wished heartily she had never written it. Gillian asked why she had done it?

"Oh," said Dolores, "things aren't interesting unless something horrid happens, or some one is frightened, or very miserable."

"I like things best just and exactly as they really are—or were," said Gillian.

"The question between sensation and character," said Bessie to her aunt. "I suppose that, on the whole, it is the few who are palpably affected by the mass of fiction in the world; but that it is needful to take good care that those few gather at least no

harm from one's work—to be faithful in it, in fact, like other things."

And there was no doubt that Bessie had been faithful in her work ever since she had realized her vocation. Her lending library books, written with a purpose, were excellent, and were already so much valued by Miss Hacket, that Gillian thought how once she should have felt it a privation not to be allowed to tell her whence they came; but to her surprise on the Sunday, instead of the constraint with which of late she had been treated at tea-time, the eager inquiry was made whether this was really the authoress, Miss Merrifield?

Secrets are not kept as well as people think. The Hackets' married sister was a neighbour of Bessie's married sister, and through these ladies it had just come round, not only who was the author of "Charlie's Whistle,' etc., but that she wrote in the —— *Magazine*, and was in the neighbourhood.

All offences seemed to be forgotten in the burning desire for an introduction to this marvel of success. Constance had made the most of her opportunities in gazing at church; but if she called, would she be introduced?

"Of course," said Gillian, "if my cousin is in the room." She spoke rather coldly and gravely, and Miss Hacket exclaimed—

"I know we have been a little remiss, my dear, I hope Lady Merrifield was not offended."

"Mamma is never offended," said Gillian—"but,

I do think, and so would she and all of us, that if Constance comes, she ought to treat Dolores Mohun —as—as usual."

The two sisters were silent, perhaps from sheer amazement at this outbreak of Gillian's, who had never seemed particularly fond of her cousin. Gillian was quite as much surprised at herself, but something seemed to drive her on, with flaming cheeks. "Dolores is half broken-hearted about it all. She did not thoroughly know how wrong it was; and it does make her miserable that the one who went along with her in it should turn against her, and cut her and all."

"Connie never meant to keep it up, I'm sure," said Miss Hacket; "but she was very much hurt."

"So was Dolly," said Gillian.

"Is she so fond of me?" said Constance, in a softened tone.

"She was," replied Gillian.

"I'm sure," said Miss Hacket, "our only wish is to forget and forgive as Christians. Lady Merrifield has behaved most handsomely, and it is our most earnest wish that this unfortunate transaction should be forgotten."

"And I'm sure I'm willing to overlook it all," said Constance. "One must have scrapes, you know; but friendship will triumph over all."

Gillian did not exactly wish to unravel this fine sentiment, and was glad that the little G.F.S. maid came in with the tea.

Lady Merrifield was a good deal diverted with Gillian's report, and invited the two sisters to luncheon on the plea of their slight acquaintance with Anne—otherwise Mrs. Daventry—with a hint in the note not to compliment Mrs. Merrifield on Elizabeth's production.

Then Dolores had to be prepared to receive any advance from Constance. She looked disgusted at first, and then, when she heard that Gillian had spoken her mind, said, "I can't think why you should care."

"Of course I care, to have Constance behaving so ill to one of us."

"Do you think me one of you, Gillian?"

"Who, what else are you?"

And Dolores held up her face for a kiss, a heartier one than had ever passed between the cousins.

There was no kiss between the quondam friends, but they shook hands with perfect civility, and no stranger would have guessed their former or their present terms from their manner. In fact, Constance was perfectly absorbed in the contemplation of the successful authoress, the object of her envy and veneration, and only wanted to forget all the unpleasantness connected with the dark head on the opposite side of the table.

"Oh, Miss Merrifield," she asked, in an interval afterwards, when hats were being put on, "how do you make *them* take your things?"

"I don't know," said Bessie, smiling. "I take all the pains I can, and try to make them useful."

"Useful, but that's so dull—and the critics always laugh at things with a purpose."

"But I don't think that is a reason for not trying to do good, even in this very small and uncertain way. Indeed," she added, earnestly. "I have no right to speak, for I have made great mistakes; but I wanted to tell you that the one thing I did get published, which was not written conscientiously—as I may say—but only to work out a silly, sentimental fancy, has brought me pain and punishment by the harm I know I did."

This was a very new idea to Constance, and she actually carried it away with her. The visit had restored the usual terms of intercourse with the Hackets, though there was no resumption of intimacy such as there had been, between Constance and Dolores. It had, however, done much to make the latter feel that the others considered themselves one with them, and there was something that drew them together in the universal missing of Mysie, and eagerness for her letters.

These were, however, rather disappointing. Mysie had not a genius for correspondence, and dealt in very bare facts. There was an enclosure which made Lady Merrifield somewhat anxious:

"My dear Mamma,

"This is for you *all by yourself*. I have been in sad mischief, for I broke the conservatory and a palm-tree with my umbrella; and I did still worse, for I

broke my promise and told all about what you told me never to. I will tell you all when I come home, and I hope you will forgive me. I wish I was at home. It is very horrid when they say one is good and one knows one is not; but I am very happy, and Lord Rotherwood is nicer than ever, and so is Fly.

"I am your affectionate and penitent and dutiful little daughter,

"MARIA MILLICENT MERRIFIELD."

With all mamma's intuitive knowledge of her little daughter's mind and forms of expression, she was puzzled by this note and the various fractures it described. She obeyed its injunctions of secrecy, even with regard to Gillian and Bessie, though she could not help wishing that the latter could have seen and judged of her Mysie.

Grandmamma was somewhat disappointed to have missed her eldest grandson, but she was obliged to leave Silverton two days before his return with his little sister. She had certainly escaped the full tumult of the entire household, but Bessie observed that she suspected that it might have been preferred to the general quiescence.

In spite of all the regrets that Bessie's more coeval cousins, Alethea and Phyllis were not at home, she and her aunt each felt that a new friendship had been made, and that they understood each other, and Bessie had uttered her resolution henceforth always to

think of the impression for good or evil produced on the readers, as well as of the effectiveness of her story. "Little did I suppose that 'Clare' would add to any one's difficulties," she said, "still less to yours, Aunt Lilias."

CHAPTER IX.

CONFESSIONS OF A COUNTRY MOUSE.

HERE were the travellers at home again, and Mysie clinging to her mother, with, "Oh, Mamma!" and a look of perfect rest. They arrived at the same time as Dolores had come, so late that Mysie was tired out, and only half awake. She was consigned to Mrs. Halfpenny after her first kiss, but as she passed along the corridor, a door was thrown back, and a white figure sprang upon her. "Oh, Mysie! Mysie!" and in spite of the nurse's chidings, held her fast in an embrace of delight. Dolores had been lying awake watching for her, and implored permission at least to look on while she was going to bed!

Harry meanwhile related his experiences to his mother and Gillian over the supper-table. The Butterfly's Ball had been a great success. He had never seen anything prettier in his life. Plants and lights had been judiciously disposed so as to make the hall a continuation of the conservatory, almost a fairy land, and the children in their costumes had been more like fairies than flesh and blood, pinafore and

bread-and-butter beings. There was a most perfect tableau at the opening of the scenery constructed with moss and plants, so as to form a bower, where the Butterfly and Grasshopper, with their immediate attendants, welcomed their company, and afterwards formed the first quadrille, Lady Phyllis, with Mysie and two other little girls staying in the house, being the butterflies, and Lord Ivinghoe and three more boys of the same ages, the grasshoppers, in pages' dresses of suitable colours.

"I never thought," said Harry, "that our little brown mouse would come out so pretty or so swell."

"She wanted to be the dormouse," said Gillian.

"That was impracticable. They were all heath butterflies of different sorts, wings very correctly coloured and dresses to correspond. Phyllis the ringlet with the blue lining, Mysie, the blue one, little Lady Alberta, the orange-tip, and the other child the burnet moth."

"How did Mysie dance?"

"Very fairly, if she had not looked so awfully serious. The dancing-mistress, French, of course, had trained them, it was more ballet than quadrille, and they looked uncommonly pretty. Uncle William granted that, though he grumbled at the whole concern as nonsense, and wondered you should send your nice little girl into it to have her head turned."

"Do you think she was happy?"

"Oh, yes, of course. She always is, but she was in prodigious spirits when we started to come home.

Lady Rotherwood said I was to tell you that no child could be more truthful and conscientious. Still somehow she did not look like the swells. Except that once, when she was got up regardless of expense for the ball, she always had the country mouse look about her. She hadn't——"

"The 'Jenny Say Caw,' as Macrae calls it?" said his mother. "Well, I can endure that! You need not look so disgusted, Gill. You didn't hear of her getting into any scrape, did you?"

"No," said Hal. "Stay, I believe she did break some glass or other, and blurted out her confession in full assembly, but I was over at Beechcroft, and I am happy to say I didn't see her."

Mysie's tap came early to her mother's door the next morning, and it was in the midst of her toilette that Lady Merrifield was called on to hear the confession that had been weighing on the little girl's mind.

"I was too sleepy to tell you last night, mamma, but I did want to do so."

"Well, then, my dear, begin at the beginning, for I could not understand your letter."

"The beginning was, mamma, that we had just come in from our walk, and we went out into the schoolroom balcony, because we could see round the corner who was coming up the drive. And we began playing at camps, with umbrellas up as tents. Ivinghoe, and Alberta, and I. Ivy was general, and I was the sentry, with my umbrella shut up, and over my shoulder. I was the only one who knew how to

present arms. I heard something coming, and called out, 'Who goes there?' and Alberta jumped up in such a hurry that the points of her tent—her umbrella, I mean—scratched my face, and before I could recover arms, over went my umbrella, perpendicular, straight, smash through the glass of the conservatory, and we heard it."

"And what did you do? Of course you told!"

"Oh yes! I jumped up and said, 'I'll go and tell Lady Rotherwood.' I knew I must before I got into a fright, and Ivinghoe said I couldn't then, and he would speak to his mother and make it easy for me, and Fly says he really meant it; but I thought then that's the way the bad ones always get the others into concealments and lies. So I wouldn't listen a moment, and I ran down, with him after me, saying, 'Hear reason, Mysie.' And I ran full butt up against somebody—Lord Ormersfield it was, I found—but I didn't know then. I only said something about begging pardon, and dashed on, and opened the door. I saw a whole lot of fine people all at five-o'clock tea, but I couldn't stop to get more frightened, and I went up straight to Lady Rotherwood and said, 'Please, I did it.' Mamma do you think I ought not?"

"There are such things as fit places and times, my dear. What did she say?"

"At first she just said, 'My dear, I cannot attend to you now, run away;' but then in the midst, a thought seemed to strike her, and she said, rather frightened, 'Is any one hurt?' and I said, Oh no; only my

umbrella has gone right through the roof of the conservatory, and I thought I ought to come and tell her directly. 'That was the noise,' said some of the people, and everybody got up and went to look. And there were Fly and Ivy, who had got in some other way, and the umbrella was sticking right upright in the top of one of those palm-trees with leaves like screens, and somebody said it was a new development of fruit. Lady Rotherwood asked them what they were doing there, and Ivy said they had come to see what harm was done. Dear Fly ran up to her and said, 'We were all at play together, mother; it was not one more than another;' but Lady Rotherwood only said, 'That's enough, Phyllis, I will come to you by-and-by in the schoolroom,' and she would have sent us away if Cousin Rotherwood himself had not come in just then, and asked what was the matter. I heard some of the answers; they were very odd, mamma. One was, 'A storm of umbrellas and of untimely confessions;' and another was, 'Truth in undress.'"

"Oh, my dear? I hope you were fit to be seen?"

"I forgot about that, mamma, I had taken off my ulster, and had my little scarlet flannel underbody, so as to make a better soldier."

"Oh!" groaned Lady Merrifield.

"And then that dear, good Fly gave a jump and flew at him, and said, 'Oh, daddy, daddy, it's Mysie, and she has been telling the truth like—like Frank, or Sir Thomas More, or George Washington, or anybody.' She really did say so, mamma."

"I can quite believe it of her, Mysie! And how did Cousin Rotherwood respond?"

"He sat down upon one of the seats, and took Fly on one knee and me on the other, though we were big for it—just like papa, you know—and made us tell him all about it. Lady Rotherwood got the others out of the way somehow—I don't know how, for my back was that way, and I think Ivinghoe went after them, but there was some use in talking to Cousin Rotherwood; he has got some sense, and knows what one means, as if he was at the dear, nice playing age, and Ivinghoe was his stupid old father in a book."

"Exactly," said Lady Merrifield, delighted, and longing to laugh.

"But that was the worst of it," said Mysie, sadly; "he was so nice that I said all sorts of things I didn't mean or ought to have said. I told him I would pay for the glass if he would only wait till we had helped Dolores pay for those books that the cheque was for, because the man came alive again, after her wicked uncle said he was dead, and so somehow it all came out; how you made up to Miss Constance and couldn't come to the Butterfly's Ball for want of new dresses."

"Oh, Mysie, you should not have said that! I thought you were to be trusted!"

"Yes, mamma, I know," said Mysie, meekly. "I recollected as soon as I had said it; and told him, and he kissed me and promised he would never tell anyone, and made Fly promise that she never would. But I have been so miserable about it ever since,

mamma; I tried to write it in a letter, but I am afraid you didn't half understand."

"I only saw that something was on your mind, my dear. Now that is all over, I do not so much mind Cousin Rotherwood's knowing, he has always been so like a brother; but I do hope both he and Fly will keep their word. I am more sorry for my little girl's telling than about his knowing."

"And Ivinghoe said my running in that way on all the company was worse than breaking the glass or the palm-tree. Was it, mamma?"

"Well, you know, Mysie, there is a time for all things, and very likely it vexed Lady Rotherwood more to be invaded by such a little wild colt."

"But not Cousin Rotherwood himself, mamma," said Mysie, "for he said I was quite right, and an honourable little fellow, just like old times. And so I told Ivy. And he said in *such* a way, 'Every one knew what his father was.' So I told him his father was ten thousand times nicer than ever he would be if he lived a hundred years, and I could not bear him if he talked in that wicked, disrespectful way, and Fly kissed me for it, mamma, and said her daddy was worth a hundred of such a prig as he was."

"My dear, I am afraid neither you nor Fly showed your good manners."

"It was only Ivinghoe, mamma, and I'm sure I don't care what he thinks, if he could talk of his father in that way. Isn't it what you call metallical —no—ironical?"

"Indeed, Mysie, I don't wonder it made you very angry, and I can't be sorry you showed your indignation."

"But please, mamma, what ought I to have done about the glass?"

"I don't quite know; I think a very wise little girl might have gone to Cousin Florence's room and consulted her. It would have been better than making an explosion before so many people. Florence was kind to you, I hope."

"Oh yes, mamma, it was almost like being at home in her room; and she has such a dear little house at the end of the park."

A good deal more oozed out from Mysie to different auditors at different times. By her account everything was delightful, and yet mamma concluded that all had not absolutely fulfilled the paradisaical expectation with which her country mouse had viewed Rotherwood from afar.

Lady Rotherwood was very kind, and so was the governess, and Cousin Florence especially. Cousin Florence's house felt just like a bit of home. It really was the dearest little house—and fluffy cat and kittens, and the sweetest love birds. It was perfectly delicious when they drank tea there, but unluckily she was not allowed to go thither without the governess or Louise, as it was all across the park, and a bit of village.

And Fly? Oh, Fly was always dear and good and funny; but there was Alberta to be attended to,

and other little girls sometimes, and it was not like having her here at home; nor was there any making a row in the galleries, nor playing at anything really jolly, though the great pillars in the hall seemed made for tying cords to to make a spider's web. It was always company, except when Cousin Rotherwood called them into his den for a little fun. But he had gentlemen to entertain most of the time, and the only day that he could have taken them to see the farm and the pheasants, Lady Rotherwood said that Phyllis was a little hoarse and must not get a cold before the ball.

And as to the Butterfly's Ball itself? Imagination had depicted a splendid realization of the verses, and it was flat to find it merely a children's fancy ball, no acting at all, only dancing, and most of the children not attempting any characteristic dress, only with some insect attached to head or shoulder; nothing approaching to the fun of the rehearsal at Silverton, as indeed Fly had predicted. The only attempt at representation had cost Mysie more trouble than pleasure, for the training to dance together had been a difficult and wearisome business. Two of the grasshoppers had been greatly displeased about it, and called it a beastly shame, words much shocking gentle Mysie from aristocratic lips. One of them had been as sulky, angry, and impracticable as possible, just like a log, and the other had consoled himself with all manner of tricks, especially upon the teacher and on Ivinghoe. He *would* skip like a real grasshopper, he

made faces that set all laughing, he tripped Ivinghoe up, he uttered saucy speeches that Mysie considered too shocking to repeat, but which convulsed every one with laughter, Fly most especially, and her governess had punished her for it. "She would not punish me," said Mysie, "though I know I was just as bad, and I think that was a shame!" At last the practising had to be carried on without the boys, and yet, when it came to the point, both the recusants behaved as well and danced as suitably as if they had submitted to the training like their sisters! And oh! the dressing, that was worse.

"I did not think I was so stupid," said Mysie, "but I heard Louise tell mademoiselle that I was *trop bourgeoise*, and mademoiselle answered that I was *plutôt petite paysanne*, and would never have *l'air de distinction*.

"Abominable impertinence!" cried Gillian.

"They thought I did not understand," said Mysie, "and I knew it was fair to tell them, so I said, '*Mais non, car je suis la petite souris de compagne.*'"

"Well done, Mysie!" cried her sister.

"They did jump, and Louise began apologizing in a perfect gabble, and mademoiselle said I had *de l'esprit*, but I am sure I did not mean it."

"But how could they?" exclaimed Gillian. "I'm sure Mysie looks like a lady, a gentleman's child—I mean as much as Fly or any one else."

"I trust you all look like gentlewomen, and are such in refinement and manners, but there is an air, which

comes partly of birth, partly of breeding, and that none of you, except, perhaps, Alethea, can boast of, and about which papa and I don't care one rush."

"Has Fly got it, mamma?" said Valetta. "She seemed like one of ourselves."

"Oh, yes," put in Dolores. "It was what made me think her stuck up. I should have known her for a swell anywhere."

"I'm sure Fly has no airs!" exclaimed Val, hotly, and Gillian was ready to second her; but Lady Merrifield explained. "The absence of *airs* is one ingredient, Val, both in being ladylike, and in the *distinction* in which the maid justly perceived our Mouse to be deficient. Come, you foolish girls, don't look concerned. Nobody but the maid would have ever let Mysie perceive the difference."

Mysie coloured and answered, "I don't know; I saw the Fitzhughs look at me at first as if they did not think I belonged, and Ivinghoe was always so awfully polite that I thought he was laughing at me."

"Ivinghoe must be horrid," broke out Valetta.

"The Fitzhughs said they would knock it out of him at Eton," returned Mysie. "They got very nice after the first day, and said Fly and I were twice as jolly fellows as he was."

It further appeared that Mysie had had plenty of partners at the ball, and on all occasions her full share of notice, the country neighbours welcoming her as her mother's daughter, but most of them saying she was far more like her Aunt Phyllis than her own

mother. The dancing and excitement so late at night had, however, tired her overmuch, she had cramp all the remainder of the night, could eat no breakfast the next day, and was quite miserable.

"I should like to have cried for you, mamma," she said, "but they were all quite used to it, and not a bit tired. However, Cousin Florence came in, and she was so kind. She took me to the little west room, and made me lie on the sofa, and read to me till I went to sleep, and I was all right after dinner, and had a ride on Fly's old pony, Dormouse. She has the loveliest new one, all bay, with a black mane and tail, called Fairy, but Alberta had that. Oh, it was so nice."

Altogether Lady Merrifield was satisfied that her little girl had not been spoilt for home by her taste of dissipation, though she did not hear the further confidence to Dolores in the twilight by the schoolroom fire.

"Do you know, Dolly, though Fly is such a darling, and they all wanted to be kind as well as they knew how, I came to understand how horrid you must have felt when you came among the whole lot of us."

"But you knew Fly already?"

"That made it better, but I don't like it. To feel one does not belong, and to be afraid to open a door for fear it should be somebody's room, and not quite to know who every one is. Oh, dear! it is enough to make anybody cross and stupid. Oh, I am so glad to be back again."

"I'm sure I am glad you are," and there was a little kissing match. "You'll always come to my room, won't you? Do you know, when Constance came to luncheon, I only shook hands, I wouldn't try to kiss her. Was that unforgiving?"

"I am sure I couldn't," said Mysie; "did she try?"

"I don't think so; I don't think I ever could kiss her; for I never should have said what was not true without her, and that is what makes Uncle Reginald so angry still. He would not kiss me even when he went away. Oh, Mysie! that's worse than anything," and Dolores's face contracted with tears very near at hand. "I did always so love Uncle Regie, and he won't forgive me, and father will be just the same."

"Poor dear, dear Dolly," said Mysie, hugging her. "But you know fathers always forgive, and we will try and make a little prayer about it, like the Prodigal Son's, you know."

"I don't know *properly*," said Dolores.

"I think I can say *him*," said Mysie, and the little girls sat with enfolded arms, while Mysie reverently went through the parable.

"But he had been very wicked indeed," objected Dolores, "what one calls dissipated. Isn't that making too much of such things as girls like us can do."

"I don't know," said Mysie, knitting her young brows; "you see if we are as bad as ever we can be while we are at home, it is really and truly as bad *in*

us ourselves as in shocking people that run away, because it shows we might have done *anything* if we had not been taken care of. And the poor son felt as if he could not be pardoned, which is just what you do feel."

"Aunt Lily forgives me," said Dolores, wistfully.

"And your father will, I'm sure," said Mysie, "though he is yet a great way off. And as to Uncle Regie, I do wish something would happen that you could tell the truth about. If you had only broken the palm-tree instead of me, and I didn't do right even about that! But if any mischief does happen, or accident, I promise you, Dolly, you shall have the telling of it, if you have had ever so little to do with it, and then mamma will write to Uncle Regie that you have proved yourself truthful."

Dolores did not seem much consoled by this curious promise, and Mysie's childishness suddenly gave way to something deeper. "I suppose," she said, "if one is true, people find it out and trust one."

"People can't see into one," said Dolly.

"Mamma says there is a bright side and a dark side from which to look at everybody and everything," said Mysie.

"I know that," said Dolores; "I looked at the dark side of you all when I came here."

"Some day," said Mysie, "your bright side will come round to Uncle Regie, as it has to us, you dear, dear old Dolly."

"But do you know, Mysie," whispered Dolores, in

her embrace, "there's something more dreadful that I'm very much afraid of. Do you know there hasn't been a letter from father since he was staying with Aunt Phyllis—not to me, nor Aunt Jane, nor anybody!"

"Well, he couldn't write when he was at sea, I mean there wasn't any post."

"It would not take so long as this to get to Fiji; and besides, Uncle Regie telegraphed to ask about that dreadful cheque, and there hasn't been any answer at all."

"Perhaps he is gone about sailing somewhere in the Pacific Ocean; I heard Uncle William saying so to Cousin Rotherwood." He said, "Maurice is not a fellow to resist a cruise."

"Then they are thinking about it. They are anxious."

"Not *very*," said Mysie, "for they think he is sure to be gone on a cruise. They said something about his going down like a carpenter into the deep sea."

"Making deep-sea soundings, like Dr. Carpenter! A carpenter, indeed!" said Dolores, laughing for a moment. "Oh! if it is that, I don't mind."

The weight was lifted, but by-and-by, when the two girls said their prayers together, poor Dolores broke forth again, "Oh, Mysie, Mysie, your papa has all—all of you, besides mamma, to pray that he may be kept safe, and my father has only me, only horrid me, to pray for him, and even I have never cared to do it really till just lately! Oh, poor, poor father! And

suppose he should be drowned, and never, never have forgiven me!"

It was a trouble and misery that recurred night after night, though apparently it weighed much less during the day—and nobody but Mysie knew how much Dolores was suffering from it. Lady Merrifield was increasingly anxious as time went on, and still no mail brought letters from Mr. Mohun, but confidence based on his erratic habits, and the uncertainty of communication began to fail. And as she grieved more for the possible loss, she became more and more tender to her niece, and strange to say, in spite of the terror that gnawed so achingly every night, and of the ordeal that the Lent Assizes would bring, Dolores was happier and more peaceful than ever before at Silverton, and developed more of her bright side.

"I really think," wrote Lady Merrifield to Miss Mohun, "that she is growing more simple and child-like, poor little maid. She is apparently free from all our apprehensions about dear Maurice, and I would not inspire her with them for the world. Neither does she seem to dread the trial, as I do for her, nor to guess what cross-examination may be. Constance Hacket has been *subpœnaed*, and her sister expatiates on her nervousness. It is one comfort that Reginald *must* be there as a witness, so that it is not in the power of Irish disturbances to keep him from us! May we only be at ease about Maurice by that time!"

CHAPTER X.

IN COURT AND OUT.

How Dolores's heart beat when Colonel Mohun drove up to the door! She durst not run out to greet him among her cousins; but stood by her aunt, feeling hot and cold and trembling, in the doubt whether he would kiss her.

Yes, she did feel his kiss, and Mysie looked at her in congratulation. But what did it mean? Was it only that it came as a matter of course, and he forgot to withhold it, or was it that he had given up hopes of her father, and was sorry for her? She could not make up her mind, for he came so late in the evening that she scarcely saw him before bed-time, and he did not take any special notice of her the next morning. He had done his best to save her from being long detained at Darminster, by ascertaining as nearly as possible when Flinders's case would come on, and securing a room at the nearest inn, where she might await a summons into court. Lady Merrifield was going with them, but would not take either of her daughters, thinking that every home eye would be

an additional distress, and that it was better that no one should see or remember Dolores as a witness.

Miss Mohun met the party at the station, going off, however, with her brother into court, after having established Lady Merrifield and her niece in an inn parlour, where they kept as quiet as they could, by the help of knitting, and reading aloud. Lady Merrifield found that Dolores had been into court before, and knew enough about it to need no explanation or preparation, and being much afraid of causing agitation, she thought it best only to try to interest her in such tales as "Neale's Triumphs of the Cross," instead of letting her dwell on what she most dreaded, the sight of the prisoner, and the punishment her words might bring upon him.

The morning ended, and Uncle Reginald brought word that his case would come on immediately after luncheon. This he shared with his sister and niece, saying that Jane had gone to a pastrycook's with—with Rotherwood—thinking this best for Dolly. He seemed to be in strangely excited spirits, and was quite his old self to Dolores, tempting her to eat, and showing himself so entirely the kind uncle that she would have been quite cheered up if she had not been afraid that it was all out of pity, and that he knew something dreadful.

Lord Rotherwood met them at the hotel entrance, and took his cousin on his arm; Dolores following with her uncle, was sure that she gave a great start at something that he said; but she had to turn in a

different direction to wait under the charge of her uncle, who treated her as if she were far more childish and inexperienced in the ways of courts than she really was, and instructed her in much that she knew perfectly well; but it was too comfortable to have him kind to her for her to take the least offence, and she only said "Yes" and "Thank you" at the proper places.

The sheriff, meantime, had given Lord Rotherwood and Lady Merrifield seats near the judge, where Miss Mohun was already installed. Alfred Flinders was already at the bar, and for the first time Lady Merrifield saw his somewhat handsome but shifty-looking face and red beard, as the counsel for the prosecution was giving a detailed account of his embarrassed finances, and of his having obtained from the inexperienced kindness of a young lady, a mere child in age, who called him uncle, though without blood relationship, a draft of her father's for seven pounds, which, when presented at the bank, had become one for seventy.

As before, the presenting and cashing of the seventy pounds was sworn to by the banker's clerk, and then Dolores Mary Mohun was called.

There she stood, looking smaller than usual in her black, close-fitting dress and hat, in a place meant for grown people, her dark face pale and set, keeping her eyes as much as she could from the prisoner. When the counsel spoke she gave a little start, for she knew him, as one who had often spent an evening with her

parents, in the cheerful times while her mother lived. There was something in the familiar glance of his eyes that encouraged her, though he looked so much altered by his wig and gown, and it seemed strange that he should question her, as a stranger, on her exact name and age, her father's absence, the connection with the prisoner, and present residence. Then came:

"Did your father leave any money with you?"

"Yes."

"What was the amount?"

"Five pounds for myself; seven besides."

"In what form was the seven pounds?"

"A cheque from W.'s bank."

"Did you part with it?"

"Yes."

"To whom?"

"I sent it to him."

"To whom if you please?"

"To Mr. Alfred Flinders." And her voice trembled.

"Can you tell me when you sent it away?"

"It was on the 22nd of December."

"Is this the cheque?"

"It has been altered."

"Explain in what manner?"

"There has 'ty' been put at the end of the written 'seven,' and a cipher after the figure 7 making it 70."

"You are sure that it was not so when it went out of your possession?"

"Perfectly sure."

Mr. Calderwood seemed to have done with her, and said, "Thank you;" but then there stood up a barrister, whom she suspected of being a man her mother had disliked, and she knew that the worst was coming when he said, in a specially polite voice too, "Allow me to ask whether the cheque in question had been intended by Mr. Mohun for the prisoner?"

"No."

"Or was it given to you as pocket-money?"

"No, it was to pay a bill."

"Then did you divert it from that purpose?"

"I thought the man was dead."

"What man?"

"Professor Mühlwasser."

"The creditor?"

"Yes."

Mr. Calderwood objected to these questions as irrelevant; but the prisoner's counsel declared them to be essential, and the judge let him go on to extract from Dolores that the payment was intended for an expensive illustrated work on natural history, which was to be published in Germany. Her father had promised to take two copies of it if it were completed; but being doubtful whether this would ever be the case, he had preferred leaving a draft with her to letting the account be discharged by his brother, and he had reckoned that seven pounds would cover the expense.

"You say you supposed the author was dead. What reason had you for thinking so?"

"He told me; Mr. Flinders did."

"Had Mr. Mohun sanctioned your applying this sum to any other purpose than that specified?"

"No, he had not. I did wrong," said Dolores, firmly.

He wrinkled up his forehead, so that the point of his wig went upwards, and proceeded to inquire whether she had herself given the cheque to the prisoner.

"I sent it."

"Did you post it?"

"Not myself. I gave it to Miss Constance Hacket to send it for me."

"Can you swear to the sum for which it was drawn when you parted with it?"

"Yes. I looked at it to see whether it was pounds or guineas."

"Did you give it loose or in an envelope?"

"In an envelope."

"Was any other person aware of your doing so?"

"Nobody."

"What led you to make this advance to the prisoner?"

"Because he told me that he was in great distress."

"He told you. By letter or in person?"

"In person."

"When did he tell you so?"

"On the 22nd of December."

"And where?"

"At Darminster."

"Let me ask whether this interview at Darminster

took place with the knowledge of the lady with whom you reside?"

"No, it did not," said Dolores, colouring deeply.

"Was it a chance meeting?"

"No—by appointment."

"How was the appointment made?"

"We wrote to say we would come that day."

"We—who was the other party?"

"Miss Constance Hacket."

"You were then in correspondence with the prisoner. Was it with the sanction of Lady Merrifield?"

"No."

"A secret correspondence, then, romantically carried on—by what means?"

"Constance Hacket sent the letters and received them for me."

"What was the motive for this arrangement?"

"I knew my aunt would prevent my having anything to do with him."

"And you—excuse me—what interest had you in doing so?"

"My mother had been like his sister, and always helped him."

All these answers were made with a grave, resolute straightforwardness, generally with something of Dolores's peculiar stony look, and only twice was there any involuntary token of feeling, when she blushed at confessing the concealment from her aunt, and at the last question, when her voice trembled as she spoke of her mother. She kept her eyes on her interrogators

all the time, never once glancing towards the prisoner, though all the time she had a sensation as if his reproachful looks were piercing her through.

She was dismissed, and Constance Hacket was brought in, looking about in every direction, carrying a handkerchief and scent bottle, and not attempting to conceal her flutter of agitation.

Mr. Calderwood had nothing to ask her but about her having received the cheque from Miss Mohun and forwarded it to Flinders, though she could not answer for the date without a public computation back from Christmas Day, and forward from St. Thomas's. As to the amount—

"Oh, yes, certainly, seven pounds."

Moreover she had posted it herself.

Then came the cross-examination,

"Had she seen the draft before posting it?"

"Well—she really did not remember exactly."

"How did she know the amount then?"

"Well, I think—yes—I think Dolores told me so."

"You *think*," he said, in a sort of sneer. "On your oath. Do you know?"

"Yes, yes, yes. She assured me! I know something was said about seven."

"Then you cannot swear to the contents of the envelope you forwarded?"

"I don't know. It was all such a confusion and hurry."

"Why so?"

"Oh! because it was a secret."

The counsel of course availed himself of this handle to elicit that the witness had conducted a secret correspondence between the prisoner and her young friend without the knowledge of the child's natural protectors. "A perfect romance," he said, "I believe the prisoner is unmarried."

Perhaps this insinuation would have been checked, but before any one had time to interfere, Constance, blushing crimson, exclaimed, "Oh! Oh! I assure you it was not *that*. It was because she said he was her uncle and that they ill-used him."

This brought upon her the searching question whether the last witness had stated the prisoner to be really her uncle, and Constance replied, rather hotly, that she had always understood that he was.

"In fact, she gave you to understand that the prisoner was actually related to her by blood. Did you say that she also told you that he was persecuted or ill-used by her other relations?"

"I thought so. Yes, I am sure she said so."

"And it was wholly and solely on these grounds that you assisted in this clandestine correspondence?"

"Why—yes—partly," faltered Constance, thinking of her literary efforts, "so it began."

There was a manifest inclination to laugh in the audience, who naturally thought her hesitation implied something very different; and the judge, thinking that there was no need to push her further, when Mr. Calderwood represented that all this did not bear on the matter, and was no evidence, silenced Mr. Vokes, and the witness was dismissed.

The next point was that Colonel Reginald Mohun was called upon to attest that the handwriting was his brother's. He answered for the main body of the draft, and the signature, but the additions, in which the forgery lay, were so slight that it was impossible to swear that they did not come from the hand of Maurice Mohun.

"Had application been made to Mr. Mohun on the subject?"

"Yes, Colonel Mohun had immediately telegraphed to him at the address in the Fiji Islands."

"Has any answer been received?"

"No!" but Colonel Mohun had a curious expression in his eyes, and Mr. Calderwood electrified the court by begging to call upon Mr. Maurice Mohun.

There he was in the witness-box, looking sunburnt but vigorous. He replied immediately to the question that the cheque was his own, and that it had been left under his daughter's charge, also that it had been for seven pounds, and the *ty* and the cypher had never been written by him. The prisoner winced for a moment, and then looked at him defiantly.

The connection with Alfred Flinders was inquired into and explained, and being asked as to the term "Uncle," he replied, "My daughter was allowed to get into the habit of so terming him."

The sisters saw his look of pain, and Jane remembered his strong objection to the title, and his wife's indignant defence of it.

Dolores stood trembling outside in the waiting-

room, by her Uncle Reginald, from whom she heard that her father had come that morning from London with Lord Rotherwood, but that it had been thought better not to agitate her by letting her know of it before she gave her evidence.

"Has he had my letter?" she asked.

"No; he knew nothing till he saw Rotherwood last night."

All the misery of writing the confession came back upon poor Dolores, and she turned quite white and sick, but her uncle said kindly, "Never mind, my dear, he was very much pleased with your manner of giving evidence. Such a contrast to your friend's. Faugh!"

In a few more seconds Mr. Mohun had come out. He took the cold, trembling hands in his own, pressed them close, met the anxious eyes with his own, full of moisture, and said, "My poor little girl," in a tone that somehow lightened Dolly's heart of its worst dread.

"Will you go back into court?" asked the colonel.

"You don't wish it, Dolly?" said her father.

"Oh no! please not."

"Then," said the colonel, "take your father back to the room at the hotel, and we will come to you. I suppose this will not last much longer."

"Probably not half an hour. I don't want to see that fellow either convicted or acquitted."

Then Dolores found herself steered out of the passages and from among the people waiting or

gazing, into the clearer space in the street, her father holding her hand as if she had been a little child. Neither of them spoke till they had reached the sitting-room, and there, the first thing he did when the door was shut, was to sit down, take her between his knees, put an arm round her, and kiss her, saying again, "My poor child!"

"You never got my letter!" she said, leaning against him, feeling the peace and rest his embrace gave.

"No; but I have heard all. I should have warned you, Dolly; but I never imagined that he could get at you there; and I was unwilling to accuse one for whom your mother had a certain affection."

"That was why I helped him," whispered Dolores.

"I knew it," he said kindly. "But how did he find you out, and how had he the impertinence to write to you at your Aunt Lily's——"

"I wrote to him first," she said, hanging down her head.

"How was that? You surely had not been in the habit of doing so whilst I was at home."

"No; but he came and spoke to me at Exeter, the day you went away. Uncle William was not there, he had gone into the town. And *he*—Mr. Flinders, said he was going down to see you, and was very much disappointed to hear that you were gone."

"Did he ask you to write to him?"

"I don't think he did. Father, it seems too silly

now, but I was very angry because Aunt Lilias said she must see all my letters except yours and Maude Sefton's, and I told Constance Hacket. She said she would send anything for me, and I could not think of any one I wanted to write to, so I wrote to—to him."

"Ah! I saw you did not get on with your aunt," was the answer, "that was partly what brought me home." And either not hearing or not heeding her exclamation, "Oh, but now I do," he went on to explain that on his arrival at Fiji he had found that circumstances had altered there, and that the person with whom he was to have been associated had died, so that the whole scheme had been broken up. A still better appointment had, however, been offered to him in New Zealand, on the resignation of the present holder after a half-year's notice, and he had at once written to accept it. A proposal had been made to him to spend the intermediate time in a scientific cruise among the Polynesian Islands; but the letters he had found awaiting him at Vanua Levu had convinced him that the arrangements he had made in England had been a mistake, and he had therefore hurried home *vid* San Francisco, as fast as any letter could have gone, to wind up his English affairs, and fetch his daughter to the permanent home in Auckland, which her Aunt Phyllis would prepare for her.

Her countenance betrayed a sudden dismay, which made him recollect that she was a strangely undemonstrative girl; but before she had recovered the

shock so as to utter more than a long "Oh!" they were interrupted by the cup of tea that had been ordered for Dolores, and in a minute more, steps were heard, and the two aunts were in the room. "Seven years," were Jane's first words, and "My dear Maurice," Lady Merrifield's, "Oh! I wish I could have spared you this," and then among greetings came again, "Seven years," from the brother and cousin who had seen the traveller before.

"I'm glad you were not there, Maurice," said Lady Merrifield. "It was dreadful."

"I never saw a more insolent fellow!" said Lord Rotherwood.

"That Vokes, you mean," said Miss Mohun. "I declare I think he is worse than Flinders!"

"That's like you women, Jenny," returned the colonel; "you can't understand that a man's business is to get off his client!"

"When he gave him up as an honest man altogether!" cried Lady Merrifield.

"And cast such imputations!" exclaimed Aunt Jane. "I saw what the wretch was driving at all the time of the cross-examination; and if I'd been the judge, would not I have stopped him?"

"There you go, Lily and Jenny!" said the colonel, "and Rotherwood just as bad! Why, Maurice would have had to take just the same line if he had been for the defence."

"He would not have done it in such a blackguard fashion though," said Lord Rotherwood.

"I saw what his defence would be," said Mr. Mohun, briefly.

"There!" said Colonel Mohun, with a boyish pleasure in confuting his sisters; but they were not subdued.

"Now Maurice," cried Jane, "when that man was known to be utterly dishonourable and good for nothing, was it fair—was it not contrary to all common sense—to try to cast the imputation between those two poor girls? So the judge and jury felt it, I am happy to say! but I call it abominable to have thrown out the mere suggestion——"

"Nay now, Jane," said the colonel, "if the man was to be defended at all, how else was it to be done?"

"I wouldn't have had him defended at all! but, unfortunately, that's his right as an Englishman."

"That's another thing! But as the cheque did not alter itself, one of the three must have done it, and nothing was left but to show that there had been an amount of shuffling, and—in short, nonsense—that might cast enough doubt on their evidence to make it insufficient for a conviction."

"Reginald! I can't think how you can stand up for such a wretch, a vulgar wretch," cried Miss Mohun. "You put it delicately, as a gentleman who had the misfortune to be counsel in such a case might do, but he was infinitely worse than that, though that was bad enough."

"It was Vokes," put in Mr. Mohun; "but what did he say?" looking anxiously at his daughter.

"It was not so bad about her," said her uncle; "he only made her out a foolish child, easily played upon by everybody, and possibly ignorant and frightened, or led away by her regard for her supposed relation. It was the other poor girl——"

"The amiable susceptibilities of romantic young ladies!" broke out Lady Merrifield. "Oh, the creature! To think of that poor foolish Constance sitting by to hear it represented that the expedition to Darminster, and all the rest of it, was because she was actually touched by that fellow. I really felt ready to take her part."

"She had certainly brought it on herself," said Aunt Jane; "but it was atrocious of him, and if the other counsel had only known it, he stopped the cross-examination just at the wrong time, or it would have come out that it was literary vanity that was the lure. No doubt he would have made a laughing-stock of that, but it would not have been as bad as the other."

"Poor thing," said Lady Merrifield; "it was a trying retribution for schoolgirl folly and want of conscientiousness. I should think she was a sadder and a wiser woman."

"He must have overdone it," said Mr. Mohun, "he is a vulgar fellow, and always does so; but, as Reginald says, the only available defence was to enhance the folly and sentiment of the girls; but of course the judge charged the other way——"

"Entirely;" said Lord Rotherwood, "he brought

Dolly rather well out of it, saying that as he understood it, a young girl who had seen a needy connection assisted from her home might think herself justified in corresponding with him, and even in diverting to his use money left in her charge, when it was probable that it would not be required for the original object. He did not say it was right, but it was an error of judgment by no means implying swindling—in fact. He disposed of Miss Hacket in the same way—foolish, sentimental, unscrupulous, but not to that degree. Girls might be silly enough in all conscience, but not so as to commit forgery or perjury. That was the gist of it, and happily the jury were of the same opinion."

"Happily? Well, I suppose so," said Mr. Mohun, with a certain sorrowfulness of tone, into which his little daughter entered.

"I say, Rotherwood," exclaimed the colonel, as the town clock's two strokes for the half-hour echoed loudly, "if you mean to catch the 4.50, you must fly."

"Fly!" he coolly repeated. "Tell Mysie, Lily, that Fly has never ceased talking of her. That child has been saving her money to fit out one of Florence's orphan's. She——"

"Rotherwood," broke in Mr. Mohun, "your wife charged me to see that you were in time for that dinner. A ministerial one."

"Don't encourage him, Lily," chimed in the colonel. "I'll call a cab. See him safe off, Maurice."

And off he was hunted amid the laughter of the ladies; the manner of all to one another was so exactly what it had been in the old times.

"I could hardly help telling him to take care, or Victoria would never let him out again," said Miss Mohun. "Poor old fellow, it would have been a fine chance for him with four of us together."

"You can come back with us, Jenny!"

"I brought my bag in case of accidents."

"And we'll telegraph to Adeline to join us to-morrow," said Mr. Mohun, who seemed to have been seized with a hunger for the sight of his kindred.

"Telegraph! My dear Maurice, Ada's nerves would be torn to smithereens by a telegram without me to open it for her. I've a card here to post to her; but I expect that I must go down to-morrow and fetch her, which will be the best way, for I have a meeting."

"Jenny, I declare you are a caution even to Miss Hacket," said Colonel Reginald, re-entering.

"Well, Ada always was the family pet. Besides, I told you I had a G.F.S. meeting. Did you get a cab for us; Lily has had quite walking enough."

The ladies went in a cab, while the gentlemen walked. There was not much time to spare, and in the compartment into which the first comers threw themselves, they found both the Hacket sisters installed, and the gentlemen coming up in haste, nodded and got into a smoking-carriage, on seeing how theirs was occupied.

"Oh, we could have made room," said Constance, to whom a gentleman was a gentleman under whatever circumstances.

"Dear Miss Dolores's papa! Is it indeed?" said Miss Hacket.

"So wonderfully interesting," chimed in Constance. And they both made a dart at Dolores to kiss her in congratulation, much against her will.

The train clattered on, and Lady Merrifield hoped it would hush all other voices, but neither of the Hackets could refrain from discussing the trial, and heaping such unmitigated censure on the counsel for the prisoner, that Miss Mohun felt herself constrained to fly in the face of all she had said at the hotel, and to maintain the right of even *such* an Englishman to be defended, and of his advocate to prevent his conviction if possible. On which the regular sentiment against becoming lawyers was produced, and the subject might have been dropped if Constance had not broken out again, as if she could not leave it. "So atrocious, so abominably insolent, asking if he was unmarried."

"Evidently flattered!" muttered Aunt Jane, between her teeth, and unheard; but the speed slackened, and Constance's voice went on,

"I really thought I should have died of it on the spot. The bare idea of thinking I could endure such a being."

"Well," said Dolores, just as the clatter ceased at a little station. "You know you did walk up and

down with him ever so long, and I am sure you liked him very much."

An indignant "You don't understand" was absolutely cut off by an imperative grasp and hush from Miss Hacket the elder; Aunt Jane was suffocating with laughter, Lady Merrifield, between that and a certain shame for womanhood, which made her begin to talk at random about anything or everything else.

CHAPTER XI.

NAY.

"WHAT a mull they have made of it!" were Mr. Maurice Mohun's first words when he found the compartment free for a *tête-à-tête* with his brother.

"All's well that ends well," was the brief reply.

"Well, indeed! Mary would not have thought so." To which the colonel had nothing to say.

"It serves me out," his brother went on presently. "I ought to have done something for that wretched fellow before I went, or, at any rate, have put Dolly on her guard; but I always shirked the very thought of him."

"Nothing would have kept him out of harm's way."

"It might have kept the child; but she must have been thicker with him than I ever knew. However, I shall have her with me for the future, and in better hands."

"You really mean to take her out?"

"That's what brought me home. She isn't happy; that is plain from her letters; and Jane does not know what to make of her, nor Lilias either."

"When were your last letters dated?"

"The last week in September."

"Early days," muttered the colonel.

"I thought it an experiment, you know; but you said so much about Lily's girls being patterns, that I thought Jasper Merrifield might have made her more rational and less flighty, and all that sort of thing; but of course it was a very different tone from what the child was used to, and you couldn't tell what the young barbarians were out of sight."

"So I began to think last winter; but I fancy you will find that she and Lily understand one another a good deal better than they did at first."

"I thought she did not receive my intelligence as a deliverance. I am glad if she can carry away an affectionate remembrance, but I want to have her under my own eye."

"I suppose that's all right," was the half reluctant reply.

"There's Phyllis. She is full of good sense, with no nonsense about her or May, and her girls are downright charming."

"Very likely; but I say, Maurice, you must not underrate Lilias. She has gone through a good deal with Dolores, and I believe she has been the making of her. You've had to leave the poor child a good deal to herself and Fräulein, and, as you see by this affair, she had some ways that made it hard for Lily to deal with her at first."

Her father plainly did not like this. "There was

no harm in the poor child, but as I should have foreseen, there's always an atmosphere of sentiment and ritual and flummery about Lilias, totally different from what she was used to."

Colonel Mohun had nearly said, "So much the better," but turned it into, "I think you will change your opinion."

Brothers and sisters, and cousins, whatever they may be to the external world, always remain relatively to each other pretty much as they knew one another when a single home held them all. The familiar Christian names seemed to revive the old ways, and it was amusing to see the somewhat grave and silent colonel treated by his elder brother as the dashing, heedless boy, needing to be looked after, while his sister Jane remained the ready helper and counsellor, and Lady Merrifield was still in his eyes the unpractical, fanciful Lily with an unfortunately suggestive rhyme to her name.

Perhaps it maintained him in this opinion, that when he had answered all questions about Captain and Mrs. Harry May, and had dilated on their pretty house in the suburbs of Auckland, his sisters expected him to tell of the work of the Church among the Maoris and Fijians. He laughed at them for thinking colonists troubled their heads about natives.

"I know Phyllis does. One of Harry May's brothers went out as a missionary."

"Disenchanted and came home again when his wife came into a fortune."

"Not a bit of it," said Aunt Jane. "I know him and all about him. He stayed till his health broke, and now he is one of the most useful men in the country. He is coming to speak for the S.P.G. at Rockquay, Lily; and you must come and meet him and his charming wife. They will tell you a very different story about Harry's doings."

"Well," allowed Mr. Mohun, "there are apparitions of brown niggers done up as smart as twopence prancing about the house. Perfectly uninteresting, you know, the savage sophisticated out of his picturesqueness. I made a point of asking no questions, not knowing what I might be let in for."

"Then you heard nothing of Mr. Ward, the Melanesian missionary, whom Phyllis keeps a room for when he comes to New Zealand to recruit."

"The man who was convicted of murder on circumstantial evidence! Oh yes. I heard of him. I believe the labour-traffic agents heartily wish him at Portland still, he makes the natives so much too sharp."

"Aye," said the colonel, "as long as Britons aren't slaves they have no objection to anything but the name for other people."

"Wait till you get out there, Regie, and see what they all say about those lazy fellows—except, of course, ladies and parsons, and a few whom they've bitten, like May."

"The few are on the Christian side, of course," said Lady Merrifield, with irony in her tone.

Indeed, she was not at all sure that half this colonial prejudice was not assumed in order to tease her, just as in former times her brother would make game of her enthusiasms about school children; for he was altogether returned to his old self, his sister Jane, who had seen the most of him, testifying that the original Maurice had revived, as never in the course of his married life.

Dolores tried to forget or disbelieve the words she had heard about his having come to fetch her away, and said no word about them until they had been unmistakably repeated. Then she felt a sort of despair at the idea of being separated from her aunt and Mysie, for indeed they had penetrated to affections deeper than had ever been consciously stirred in her before. Yet she was old enough to shrink from allowing to her father that she preferred staying with them to going with him, and it was to her Aunt Jane that she had recourse. That lady, after returning from her expedition to bring her sister Adeline to Silverton, was surprised by a timid knock at the door, and Dolores's entrance.

"Oh, if you please, Aunt Jane, may I come in? I do so want to speak to you alone. Don't you think it is a sad pity that I should go away from the Cambridge examination? Could not you tell my father so?"

"You want to stay for the Cambridge examination," said Aunt Jane, a little amused at the manner of touching on the subject, though sorry for the girl.

"I have been taking great pains under Miss Vincent, and it does seem a pity to miss it."

"I don't think it will make much difference to you."

"Oh, but I do want to be thoroughly well educated. I meant to go through them all, like Gillian and Mysie, and I am sure father must wish it too. I know he meant it when he went out last year."

"Yes, he did," said Miss Mohun. "It was very unlucky that he did not get any of our later letters."

"I have tried to tell him that it is all different now, but he does not seem to care," said Dolores.

"He has quite made up his mind," said her aunt.

"Has he quite?" said Dolores. "I thought perhaps if you talked to him about the examination and the confirmation too——"

"But, Dolly, you are not going to a heathen country. Your confirmation will be as much attended to in New Zealand as here."

"Oh, but I should be confirmed with Mysie, and Aunt Lily would read with me, and help me!"

"Yes, I see."

"Do please tell him, Aunt Jane. He heeds what you say more than any one. *Do* tell him that the only hope of my being good is if I stay with Aunt Lily just these few years!"

"Ah, Dolly, that is what you really mean and care about—not the Cambridge business."

"Of course it is. Please tell him, Aunt Jane—somehow I can't—that I was bad and foolish when I wrote all the letters he had; but now I know better, and—and—I don't want to vex him, but I shall be ever so much better a daughter to him if he will leave me with Aunt Lily, to learn some of her goodness"—and there were tears in her eyes, for these months had softened her greatly.

"My poor Dolly!" said Aunt Jane, much more tenderly than she generally spoke. "I am very sorry for you. I do think Aunt Lily has been the making of you, and that it is very hard that you should have to be uprooted from her, just as you had learnt to value her. I will tell your father so; but honestly, I do not think it is likely to make him change his mind."

Miss Mohun sought her brother out the next day, and told him that they had all been waiting in patience when thinking that his daughter's residence at Silverton was an unsuccessful experiment. The explosion she had predicted had come, and Dolores had been a different creature ever since, owing to Lady Merrifield's management of her in the crisis; and she added that the girl was most unwilling to leave her aunt, and that she herself thought it would be much better to leave her for a few years to the advantages of her present training, where her affections had been gained. Mr. Mohun could not see it in the same light. The intimacy with Constance Hacket was in his eyes a folly, consequent on his sister's passion for

Sunday schools and charities; and Jane, being infected with the like ardour, he disregarded her explanations. The underhand correspondence could not have been carried on without great blindness and carelessness, or, at least, injudiciousness, on Lady Merrifield's part, and there was no denying that she had trusted to a sense of honour that was non-existent. Nor did he appreciate Jane's argument that the conquest of the heart and will had thus been far more thoroughly gained than it would have been by constant thwarting and watching. It was hard to forgive such an exposure as had taken place, or to believe that it had not been brought about by unjustifiable errors, more especially as Lady Merrifield was the first to accuse herself of them. Moreover, he had become sensible of a strong natural yearning for the presence of his only child, and he had been so much struck with his sister Phyllis's family that he sincerely believed himself consulting the girl's best interests. He was by no means an irreligious or ungodly man, but he had always thought his sister Lilias more or less of an enthusiast, and he did not wish to see Dolores the same. Perhaps, indeed, the poor child's manifest clinging to her aunt and cousins made him all the more resolute to remove her before her affection should be entirely weaned from himself.

He made his headquarters at Silverton, and during the next two months modified his opinions so far as to confess to his sister Jane that Lilias was a much

more sensible woman than he had believed her, and had her children well in hand. He even allowed that Dolores was improved, and owed much to her kindness; and when the first sting of the exposure was over, he could see that the treatment had been far from injudicious as regarded the girl's own character. He was even glad that warm love and friendship had grown up towards her aunt and cousins; but all this left his purpose unchanged; although, after the first, nothing was said about it, Dolores tried to forget it, and hoped that the sight of her going on well and peaceably would convince him of the inexpediency of disturbing her. She could not even mention it to Mysie, lest the dread should become a reality by being uttered. So no more passed on the subject till it became necessary to take her outfit in hand, and he also wished to take her to Beechcroft, that the old family home which he regarded with fresh tenderness might be impressed on her memory.

Then, though she never durst directly oppose the fate which he destined for her, she surprised him by a violent burst of tears and sobbing, and an entreaty that he would not take her away from Aunt Lily and Mysie a moment sooner than could be helped.

She clung to everything, even to the guinea-pigs, and she was the first in the Easter holidays to beg for the "Thorn Fortress." Indeed, Mysie was a little shocked at her grief, as disloyal and unfilial. "One ought not to mind going anywhere with one's father,"

she said; "we all thought it a great honour for Phyllis and Alethea."

"They are grown up!" said Dolores, "and Aunt Lily does get into one so! Oh, don't say there's Aunt Phyllis. I hate the very name of her."

"She must be nice," said Mysie, "Whenever the 'grown-ups' are pleased with me they say I am getting like her, as if it was the best thing one could be."

"But I don't want Mysie old and grown up, I want my Mysie now, as you are!—And you'll forget and leave off writing, like Maude Sefton."

"Never!" cried Mysie. "Right across the world you will always be my own twin cousin."

The wishes of the girl were so far fulfilled that Lady Merrifield took her to London to provide her outfit, and Mysie accompanied them. A room and its dressing-room received the three at old Mrs. Merrifield's, and the two cousins thought their close quarters ineffably precious.

Mysie was introduced to Maude Sefton, who seemed entirely unconscious of her treachery to friendship. "One had so little time, and couldn't always be writing," she said, when Dolores reproached her; "exercises were enough to tire out one's hand!"

They also drank tea with Lady Phyllis Devereux and her governess. Fly could not pour forth questions and reminiscences fast enough about all the beloved animals at Silverton, not forgetting the little G.F.S.

nursemaid, for whom she had actually made an apron in her plain-work lessons. Moreover, she deemed Dolores's fate most enviable, to be going off with her father to strange countries, away from lessons, and masters, and towns. It would be almost as good as Leila on the island.

As to the Beechcroft visit, Mr. and Mrs. Mohun collected all the brothers and sisters in England there for a week, and still Mysie and Dolores were allowed to be together, squeezed into a corner of Lady Merrifield's room. It was high summer, bright and glowing, and so dry, and even the invalidish sisters, Lady Henry Gray and Miss Adeline Mohun could not object to the sitting out on the lawn, among the dragon-flies, as in days of yore.

Much of old thought and feeling was then and there taken up again, and it was on one of the last evenings of the visit that Mr. Mohun, walking up and down the alley with Lady Merrifield, said—

"Well, Lily, I think my determination to take Dolly away was hasty. I cannot leave her now, but if I had understood all that I see at present, I should have been both content and grateful to have her among your children. I am afraid I have been ungracious."

"I never thought so, Maurice. It is quite right that she should be with you, and Phyllis will do everything for her much better than I."

"Poor child! I believe she is very sorry to go," said Mr. Mohun; "but, at any rate, she will remember

Silverton as, I hope, a lasting influence on her life."

Dolores truly believed that so it would be, and that her aunt's guidance would be always looked back upon as the turning-point of her life.

"It is my own fault," she said, as on the last night she clung tearfully to Lady Merrifield; "if I had behaved better I might have gone on just like one of your own."

"You will still be in my heart like one of my own, dear child," said Lady Merrifield. "We know the way in which we all can hold together as one; keep to that, and the distance apart will matter the less."

And as they watched Dolores and her father driven away to the station the next morning, Jane Mohun laid her hand on her sister's arm and said, "You thought you had made a great failure, Lily, but is not the other side of a failure often a success?"

By-and-by came letters from Dolores. She seemed after the first to have enjoyed her journey, for, as she wrote to Lady Merrifield, in a letter, very private, and all to her own self, "Father was so very good and kind to me, I don't know how to tell you. It was as if a little bit of mother had got into him, and now I am here I think I shall like the Mays. Indeed, I am trying to remember your advice, and not beginning by hating everybody and thinking *who they are not.* Aunt Phyllis is very nice indeed, and sometimes her eyes and mouth get like Mysie's, and her voice is just exactly

yours. Only she is plump and roundabout, not a dear, tall, graceful figure like my White Lily Aunt. Please don't call it nonsense, for indeed I mean it, and Aunt Phyllis does like your photograph so much. I have the whole group hung up in my room, and you over it, and I wish you all good morning every day, for I never, never, as long as I live, shall love anybody like you and Mysie."

THE END.

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